Rachel Lipson   Sep 28, 2022

Building the new high road: Immigrants and workforce development

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Key Takeaways

What you need to know:

Immigrants are critical to the U.S. workforce, but there has been limited focus on what enables them to thrive in the economy. This report draws on data from 131 applicants to WES Mariam Assefa Fund's open grant competition to better understand the landscape of programs, policies, and practices intended to strengthen immigrant inclusion in the workforce.

Analyzing these approaches, we find that:

- *Programs are 50% more likely to focus on newcomers than longer-term residents.*

- *Two-thirds of organizations work with economic immigrants and refugees but less than 25% focus on migrant workers or immigration detainees.*

- *Job quality is a growing priority. Over half of the organizations focus on increasing wages, career advancement, or creating a safe and inclusive work environment.*

- *Skills transferability is high need, but under-resourced. Only 5% of applicants focus on helping immigrants translate their credentials and experience from other countries.*

- *Over 80% of organizations plan to work with employers, but only one-quarter of organizations have direct hiring relationships. Employer advisory or advocacy efforts appear to be an increasing priority.*

- *98% of organizations have leaders with lived experience in immigrant or refugee communities.*

Building the New High Road highlights organizations that are working to build an economy where all immigrants have the chance to thrive. Investing in immigrants' human potential is an investment in our collective future.

Contents

Background

Immigration is a critical component of a thriving U.S. economy. As the U.S. workforce continues to age, immigrants play an increasingly important role in sustaining and growing key American industries. First, immigrants are critical to meeting skill needs in key strategic sectors of the U.S. economy. Research shows that immigrants tend to fill roles in industries with significant shortages, such as healthcare, transportation, manufacturing, farming, education, and food services. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants disproportionately worked roles deemed "critical infrastructure" in settings ranging from child care centers to farms and to hospitals and grocery stores. Second, immigrants contribute to geographic equality of opportunity in America, in particular, supporting the economies of mid-sized cities with tight labor markets. Over the last decade, cities with some of the largest increases in immigrant populations experienced some of the highest rates of economic growth. Finally, in addition to meeting unfilled skill needs, immigrants help create new jobs. Higher levels of entrepreneurship among immigrants in the U.S. have been well-documented – a recent study found that immigrants launch new companies at twice the rate of native-born Americans.

Despite the benefits of immigration, levels of migration have been declining in the U.S., especially after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the last administration, immigration levels fell dramatically. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the number of immigrant visas issued for permanent residence fell 48 percent between 2019 and 2020, and temporary visas fell 54 percent. During the Trump Administration, refugee resettlement was cut 80 percent. 2020 and 2021 refugee resettlement rates were the lowest since the modern refugee resettlement program was created in 1980. When the U.S. suspended issuing new work visas in 2020, the U.S. economy lost out on $100 billion, according to estimates from Brookings.

However, even absent any changes to immigration policy, the U.S. is still far from leveraging the full human and economic potential of immigrants already in the country. Many immigrants with in-demand skills encounter significant frictions in translating their experience from abroad to the U.S. labor market. There are over two million U.S. immigrants with a college degree who are unemployed or underemployed. Many of these workers have valuable skills that go unused, in part because they cannot navigate occupational licensing requirements or access professional recredentialing services that would enable their prior qualifications and experiences to be recognized. For instance, right before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were approximately 270,000 college-educated immigrant workers in the United States with medicine- or health-related degrees that were out of the labor force or underemployed.

In addition, many immigrant workers face unique challenges in the workplace. Some immigrants experience discrimination at work or encounter bias in hiring and advancement decisions. Research finds they may be more likely to be laid off during a downturn. And immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, are more likely to work jobs with higher personal safety risk, higher levels of anxiety and depression, and lower levels of worker protection. This is harmful both for the worker, the firm, and society – research finds that physical and mental health stressors make people less productive in the workplace.

Finally, many immigrants in the U.S. lack consistent access to critical workforce development and career advancement supports. For instance, the U.S. Department of Labor employment services program, the Wager-Peyser Act, served approximately 225,000 English Language Learners in Program Year 2020. The major federal workforce development program, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), served even fewer. In contrast, the Census estimates there are 27.6 million foreign-born workers and approximately 23 million adults with limited English proficiency in the United States. Simultaneously, English language courses for adults are persistently oversubscribed, with long wait lists, despite strong evidence of returns to earnings and civic engagement. Finally, immigrants, like other U.S. workers, suffer from the persistent declining investment in training from employers. Employer-financed training is especially low for frontline roles with lower educational requirements. This combination of factors highlights significant room for growth in better serving immigrant workers across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Why this research

Given both the opportunities and challenges highlighted above, there is a strong case for investments that smooth employment transitions for immigrants. For instance, past research shows that wraparound supports like access to childcare, transportation, case management services, career coaching, and English language training can have a powerful and statistically significant impact on employment rates and earnings.

To fully and fairly include immigrants in the U.S. workforce, the country deserves a thriving ecosystem of organizations that can help create the enabling conditions for shared prosperity. Many immigrants and refugees already benefit from the services of organizations focused on helping them access quality jobs. Many more could realize their full potential and thrive in the U.S. economy if access to services and supports were expanded.

However, we know relatively little about the organizations that serve this population, particularly those that go beyond human services and focus on employment support, economic advocacy, and worker voice. Our contribution with this research is to begin to paint the landscape of organizations that are focused on successful inclusion of immigrants into the workforce.

In addition, the focus of our data partner, WES Mariam Assefa Fund, on employer practices is especially timely. There is a broader conversation going on in the country on job quality and worker voice. Employers play a crucial role for both and are at the center of efforts to open up, or inhibit, access to opportunity for immigrants in the U.S.

We believe this work has relevance across sectors – for employers that wish to hire, retain, and advance immigrant talent; for policymakers that aim to leverage the power of immigrants to boost the vitality of the U.S. economy, for philanthropic funders seeking to invest in programs and services that support economic mobility for immigrants, and, finally, for practitioner organizations in the field that work every day to help immigrants and refugees achieve their dreams in America.

About the data

The data for this report comes from grant applications submitted to the Mariam Assefa Fund, the philanthropic arm of World Education Services (WES). In 2021, WES Mariam Assefa Fund ran two open calls for funding targeting U.S. and Canadian organizations **"working to shift employer practices and develop career pathways that support the economic mobility and success of immigrants and refugees."** Through an open application process, any organization that self-identified as working with employers to invest in the economic success of immigrants and refugees was eligible to apply. WES asked organizations to complete a Letter of Intent (LOI) that, among other responses, would specify how their initiative would drive systems change around employer practices. The LOI application also stipulated that the grants would not support incremental expansion of existing programs, programs designed in isolation without meaningful employer or worker engagement, one-off programs, research projects without actionable recommendations or stakeholder engagement, or scholarships and grants to individuals. Beyond these guideposts, the competition was not prescriptive about the types of investments the Fund would consider. Notably, for-profit social enterprises were eligible to apply in addition to nonprofits. In addition, WES indicated that most grants would range from $100,000 to $150,000 and would span one to two years.

About World Education Services and the Mariam Assefa Fund

World Education Services (WES) is a nonprofit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students, immigrants, and refugees achieve their educational and career goals in the United States and Canada. For more than 45 years, WES has set the standard of excellence in the field of international academic credential evaluation. Its philanthropic arm, the Mariam Assefa Fund, seeks to catalyze economic inclusion, opportunities, and mobility in support of immigrants and refugees in the U.S. and Canada. Through grantmaking, impact investing, partnerships, and field-building, the Fund supports efforts to bring about inclusive economies and to ensure that all immigrants and refugees can achieve their goals and thrive. The Fund has distributed more than US$14.7 million in the U.S. and Canada since launching in 2019 and partnered with more than 90 organizations across both countries.

Applications for the competition were submitted in two rounds. The first competition ran from May 18 to July 7, 2021 and WES received 84 applications. The second competition ran from September 21 to November 15, 2021 and WES received 61 applications. These applications serve as the primary data source for this white paper.
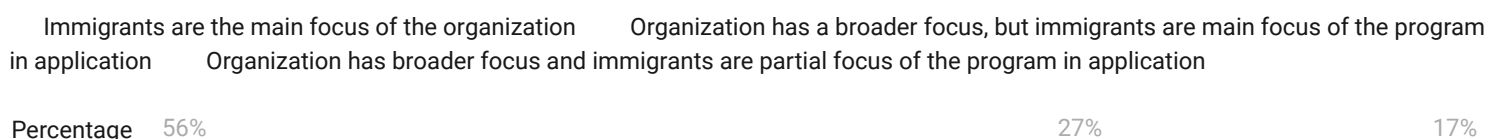
Methodology

In this white paper, we analyze two merged datasets, one from each round of funding. In aggregate, the dataset comprises applications from 131 unique organizations *(see notes in Appendix for more details on creation of the merged dataset).*

We focused our analysis on four primary research questions:

1. What are the structural characteristics of organizations focused on the economic advancement of immigrants and refugees?

2. How do these organizations work with employers?

3. Which populations do these organizations serve?

4. What are common models and theories of change?

We utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods for our analysis. For the quantitative portion, we ran descriptive statistics for application questions that translate into discrete numerical values. For the qualitative work, three researchers divided the grant applications and used a mix of inductive and deductive coding practices to capture variables that could help us better understand the type of intervention proposed by the applicant. As a quality control measure, researchers coded a subset of entries from another researcher's portion to ensure consistency in coding and variable definition.

Figure 1. Organizational focus

Immigrants are the main focus of the organization   Organization has a broader focus, but immigrants are main focus of the program in application   Organization has broader focus and immigrants are partial focus of the program in application

Percentage   56%   27%   17%

Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Limitations

This report takes advantage of a unique, private dataset from a grant application. However, as a research approach, this kind of data poses several limitations for analysis.

The first challenge is the population frame. The original LOI from WES focused on "*refugees and immigrants.*" For sake of simplicity, we primarily use the "immigrant" terminology in our analysis. However, we understand there are meaningful differences both between the experiences of refugee and immigrant populations and within these two groups. It is also worth noting, as seen above, that a sizable share of organizations in the dataset (44 percent) do not exclusively focus on immigrants. These are organizations with missions and programs that align with serving immigrants, but also reach other groups. In addition, the organizations included in this dataset are only those that responded to a philanthropic call for proposals. The call for proposals included an explicit focus on employer practices. Organizations that do not prioritize employer engagement likely would not apply. All of this is to say, while we believe these applications provide a valuable tool to begin understanding the field, we can't state definitively that our findings are representative of all organizations in the United States that serve immigrant workers.

A second limitation worth noting is that we did not analyze any secondary application and interview materials that finalists and awardees may have submitted to WES.

Finally, we emphasize that the data referenced in this analysis is all self-reported from a grant application. The authors did not independently verify any information beyond what the applicants themselves submitted. We have no reason to question the good intentions of applicants, but we can't ensure the accuracy of responses.

What are the characteristics of organizations that serve immigrant workers?

In this section, we draw on data from the WES Mariam Assefa Fund applications to better understand the form, focus, and structure of organizations that serve immigrant workers (The RFP called for ideas from organizations "working with employers to advance more inclusive practices that improve economic mobility for immigrant and refugee workers").

Programs targeting economic immigrants and refugees are more prevalent.

Two-thirds of organizations stated that their services impacted economic immigrants and two-thirds also focus on refugees and displaced people. Immigrant workers in low-wage jobs were also commonly cited (60 percent). Economic immigrants comprise a large share of the U.S. immigrant population, which may explain why services targeting them are common. However, the distribution of applications poses important questions about how to ensure resources reach some of the highest-need groups, like migrant workers and detainees, who were only

targeted by 28 and 23 percent of programs, respectively. Looking at identity, almost all applicants stated that they target members of specific ethnic and racial groups (98 percent).

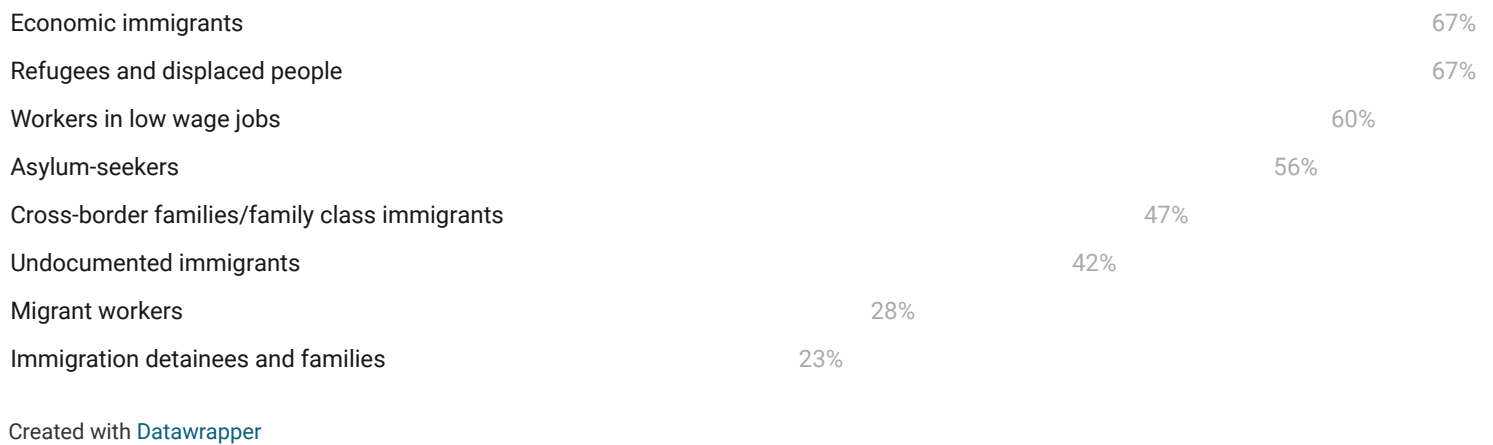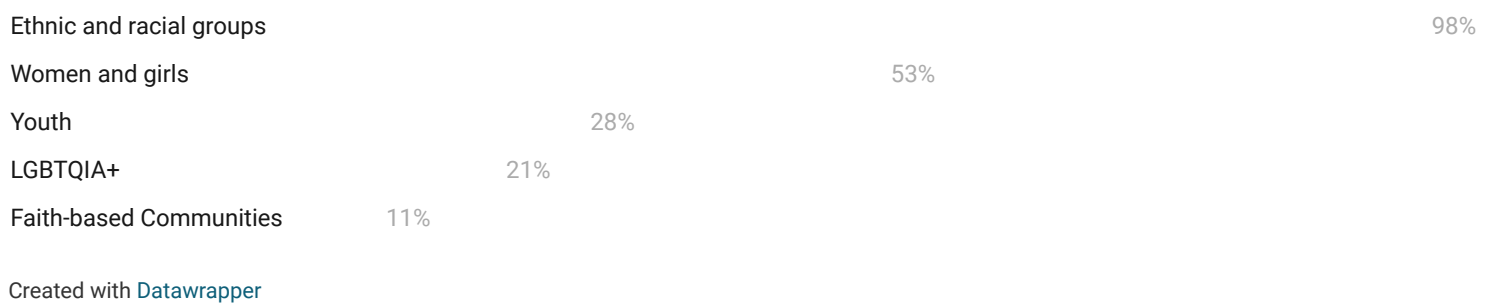## Figure 2. Populations served by applicants, groups*

Economic immigrants	67%
Refugees and displaced people	67%
Workers in low wage jobs	60%
Asylum-seekers	56%
Cross-border families/family class immigrants	47%
Undocumented immigrants	42%
Migrant workers	28%
Immigration detainees and families	23%

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Figure 3. Populations served by applicants, identities*

Ethnic and racial groups	98%
Women and girls	53%
Youth	28%
LGBTQIA+	21%
Faith-based Communities	11%

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Only applicants from the second round of funding were surveyed on these questions. Applicants were given the option to select multiple choices.

Services appear weighted towards newcomers over longer-term residents.

Almost all organizations (93 percent) focused on serving recent arrivals. More established immigrants were a focus for a still sizable, but smaller share (60 percent) of organizations that serve immigrant workers. This may reflect that as immigrants become more included into the U.S. economy over time, there is less need for support. However, if program eligibility will eventually expire based on tenure, that means programs must be paying attention to how to sustain the impact of interventions over time. In addition, the field must carefully monitor the changing composition of immigrants over time to ensure they are reaching high-need populations. In fact, in recent years, newer arrivals actually tended to be more highly educated than immigrants who arrived in earlier periods – 48 percent of immigrants who entered the United States between 2014 and 2019 held at least a bachelor's degree.

Figure 4. Populations served by applicants, by tenure*

Newcomers (up to 5 years)	93%
Recent immigrants (5 - 10 years)	84%
Longer term residents/established immigrants (10+ years)	60%

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*Only applicants from the second round of funding were surveyed on these questions. Applicants were given the option to select multiple choices.

Regions may vary substantially in terms of the breadth and depth of support services provided to immigrants.

In total, 29 states were represented in the dataset. About half of the organizations were headquartered in just six states: New York (16), California (15), Massachusetts (13), Ohio (7), Pennsylvania (7), and Michigan (7). These states appear to have both particularly well-networked and engaged service providers. Some also share relatively immigrant-friendly state policy environments. Overall, organizations were weighted toward the coasts, with 66 percent of organizations located in either the Pacific (AK, CA, HI, OR, WA) , New England (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT), Middle Atlantic (NJ, NY, PA), or South Atlantic (DC, DE, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, WV, VA) regions. The Midwest (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI) was also somewhat well-represented, however, comprising 15 percent of organizations.

The geographic distribution of applications suggests there may be some regions where employment support for immigrants is under-invested in or under-emphasized relative to the need. For instance, the Sun Belt was surprisingly under-represented. According to the Migration Policy Institute, Nevada has the fifth-largest share of immigrants in its state population nationally, but WES only received one application from Nevada. Texas has the second-highest number of immigrants in the country but represented only three percent of applications. Only one organization applied from Arizona and zero applied from Florida, two of the states with some of the largest immigrant populations nationally. Charleston and Nashville have been cited as cities with the fastest growing immigrant populations over the period 2010 to 2019, but WES received no applications from South Carolina or Tennessee.

However, we also note two important limitations here. First, the grant application asked for headquarters locations only. Some organizations have a national footprint and may serve populations in locations beyond where they are headquartered. Second, the distribution may instead reflect challenges about the competition on outreach and recruitment to provider networks in certain regions rather than a true geographic mismatch in service provision.

Figure 5. Location of applicant headquarters
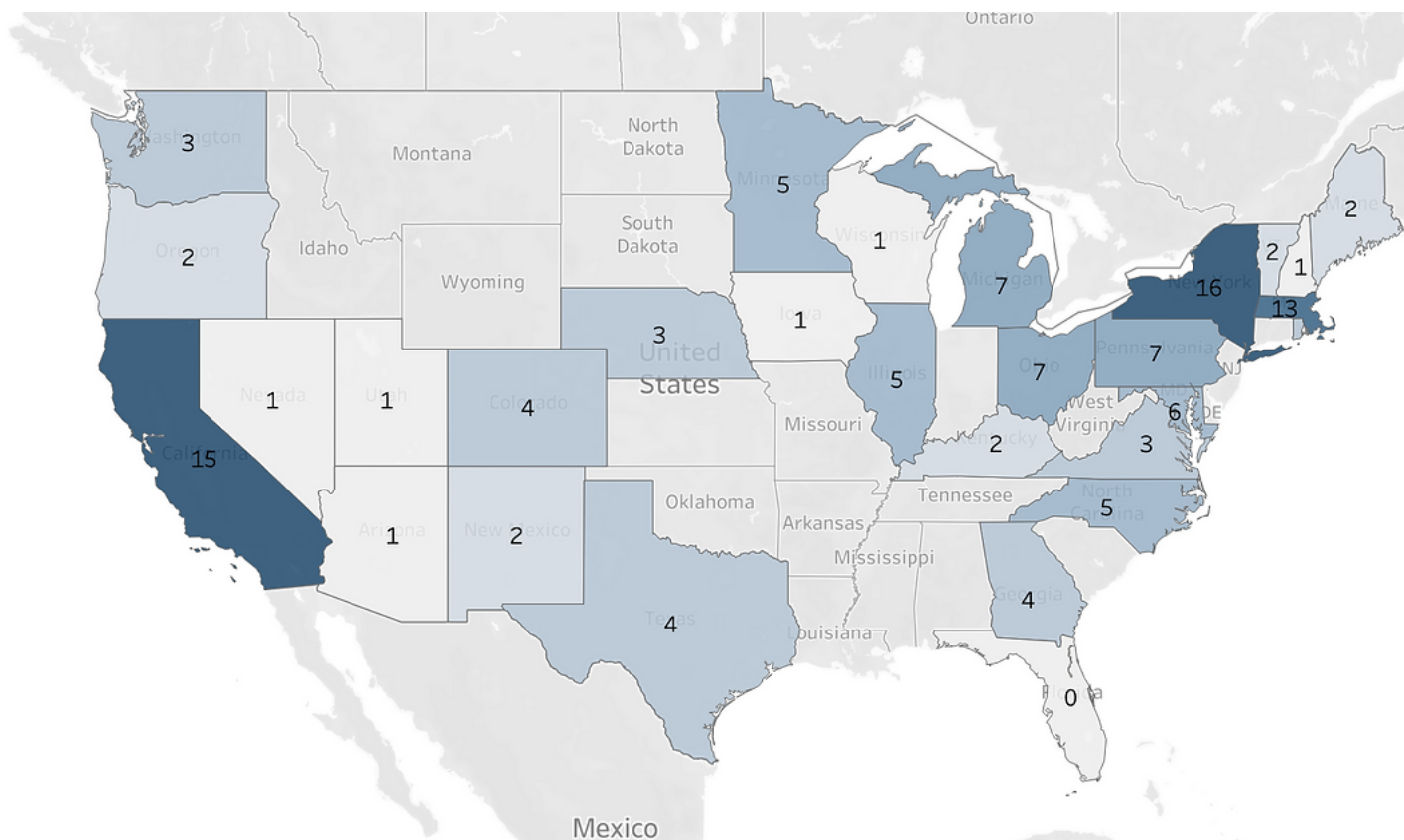
Most organizations are relatively small nonprofits, but new models are growing.

Over 70 percent of the organizations that applied for funding employed 20 or fewer full-time employees. The annual operating budgets also reflect modest reach, with a median of approximately $1.7 million annually and 25 percent of organizations reporting annual operating budgets below $700,000.

While WES accepted applications from for-profit organizations, the dataset suggests the ecosystem is still largely dominated by nonprofits. Eighty-three percent of organizations who applied were 501(c)(3) nonprofits and only five percent of the organizations that applied were mission-driven for-profits.

However, the data also implies that organizations serving immigrant workers are growing and developing new models. Over half (55 percent) of the applicants were seeking funding for a new program. An additional 42 percent wanted support to scale an existing program (about half of those with some modifications to the current program structure). Only three percent of applicants were looking for sustaining funding for existing programs, though this may be explained by the language in the LOI indicating a strong orientation towards growth and change initiatives.

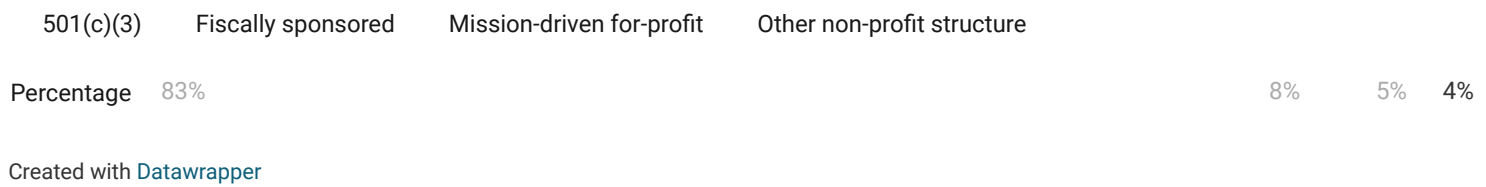Figure 6. Organization characteristics, by category of applicant

501(c)(3)	Fiscally sponsored	Mission-driven for-profit	Other non-profit structure

	501(c)(3)				Mission-driven for-profit	Other non-profit structure
Percentage	83%				8%	5%	4%

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Figure 7. Organization characteristics, by number of FTE*

1 to 5	6 to 20	21 to 50	51 to 100	101+

	1 to 5		6 to 20		51 to 100	101+	
Percentage	30%		42%		6%	13%	9%

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Figure 8. Organization characteristics, by number of volunteers*

1 to 5	6 to 20	21 to 50	51 to 100	101+

	1 to 5	6 to 20	21 to 50	51 to 100	101+
Percentage	20%	16%	20%	20%	24%

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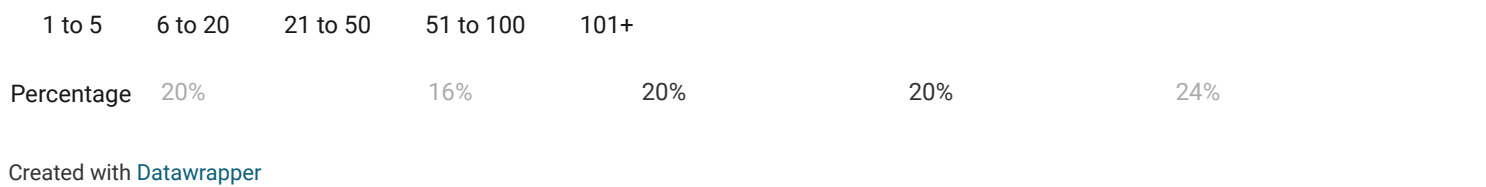
Table 1. Annual Operating Budget*

25th Percentile	$0.7 million
Median/50th Percentile	$1.7 million
75th Percentile	$4.5 million

Only applicants from the second round of funding were surveyed on these questions.

Leaders in the field are diverse and have lived experience.

Examining the demographic composition of the applicant field, the vast majority of organizations reported that their "leadership team and staff share the same background, belong to the community being served, or have significant experience" with the issues they wished to address (98 percent). This number is substantially higher

than what the Project on Workforce observed in <u>previous research on the education-to-employment sector more broadly</u> (42 percent), although that competition asked specifically for the background of the founder, CEO, or Executive Director. In contrast, WES asked for information on a broader group of leadership – the Executive Team and Board leadership – to reflect the different voices that steer an organization's mission. Leaders were also diverse on other measures – the majority of organizations had executives who identified as first-generation (52 percent) and over 80 percent identified as either first- or second-generation. Executive teams were majority non-white, including 34 percent of executive leaders identified as Black/African American/African, 16 percent Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx, and 11 percent Asian/Asian American.

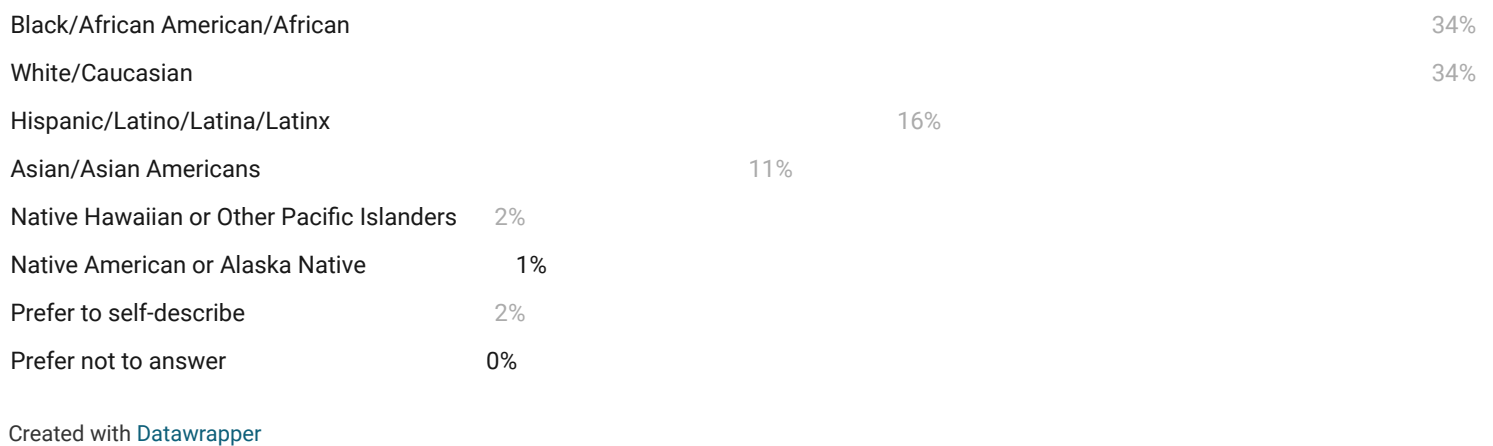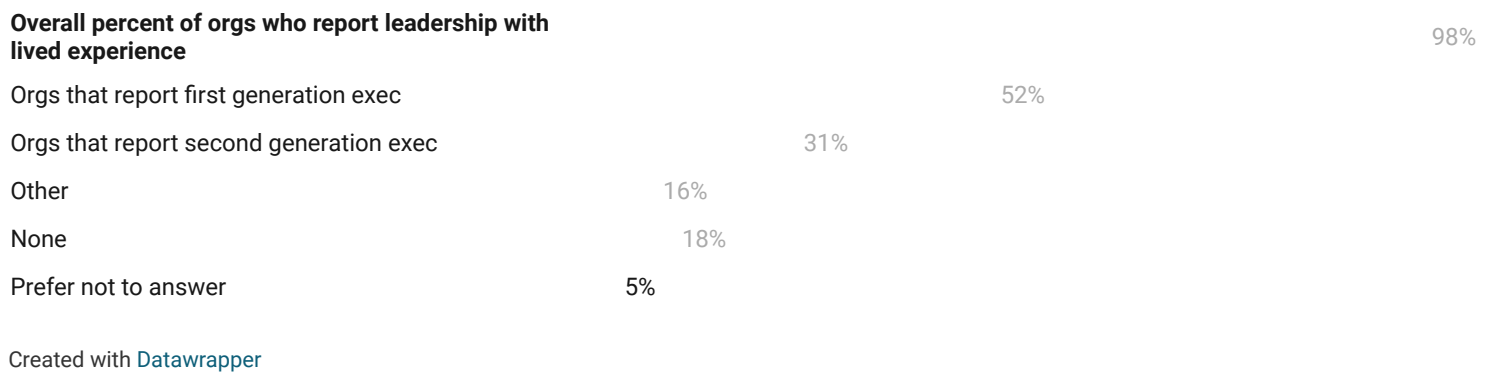### Figure 9. Organization leadership characteristics, by race/ethnicity*

Black/African American/African	34%
White/Caucasian	34%
Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx	16%
Asian/Asian Americans	11%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders	2%
Native American or Alaska Native	1%
Prefer to self-describe	2%
Prefer not to answer	0%

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Figure 10. Organization leadership characteristics, by lived experience*

Overall percent of orgs who report leadership with lived experience	98%
Orgs that report first generation exec	52%
Orgs that report second generation exec	31%
Other	16%
None	18%
Prefer not to answer	5%

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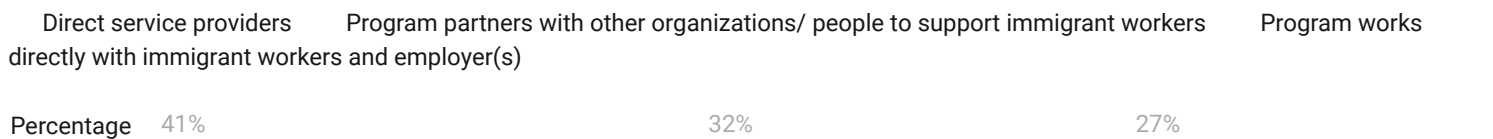*Applicants were given the option to select multiple choices.*

Theory of Change and Program Models

In this section, we analyze the text responses from grant applicants to uncover insights about organizations' missions, metrics of success, and theories of change.

Organizations employ a variety of program models to improve economic mobility for immigrant workers.

Programs are diverse in intervention models. While some applicants appear to be more traditional direct service providers, others prioritize influence, advocacy, and partnerships to drive inclusive practices in the workforce that benefit immigrants. About a quarter of organizations both provide direct support services to immigrants, while also engaging directly with employers.

Figure 11. Organizational model of applicants

Direct service providers	Program partners with other organizations/ people to support immigrant workers	Program works directly with immigrant workers and employer(s)
Percentage 41%	32%	27%

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Training is not the only proposed route to advancement.

Approximately 60 percent of organizations were offering some kind of training to immigrant workers, but only 11 (eight percent) were focused on training alone. Training efforts appear to be somewhat evenly split between programs focused on foundational, transferable skills like communication or English language (29 percent of applicants) and those focused on job-specific training for particular industries or roles (32 percent of applicants).

In contrast to more traditional workforce training approaches, applicants engaged in a broad range of interventions towards the stated goal of improving economic mobility for immigrant and refugee workers. Many organizations were piloting new models aimed to reduce discrimination against immigrants, connect job seekers to quality jobs, and build more inclusive workplaces.

The largest shares of organizations were focused on advising companies to create more equitable talent practices for immigrants or on advocacy that could change policy and impact economic opportunity, hiring, and advancement. Sixty-five percent of organizations engaged in advisory or advocacy activities in some form.

Notably, a significant share of organizations combine direct service efforts with influence and practice change initiatives. Twenty-seven percent of organizations refer to a joint mission – that being that they worked directly to prepare immigrants to succeed in the workforce, but also implemented activities aimed to influence employers to create an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Table 2. Purpose of program*

Model	Number	Percentage
Advisory (e.g., DEI training, advising firms on inclusive talent practices)	53	40%

Advocacy	44	33%
Job-specific skills training (i.e., training for a specific industry or role)	42	32%
Foundational skills training (i.e., training skills that are not industry-specific such as language training)	38	29%
Infrastructure (e.g., rented space to work, furniture), worker organizing, and legal representation	16	12%

*Categories are not mutually-exclusive. Applicants could be classified under multiple

Most organizations partner with employers in some form, but modes of engagement are diverse.

Aligned with the competition's stated purpose to shift employer practices, most organizations applying for WES funding (82 percent) indicated that they would work with employers in some way. This is a noticeable uptick from previous work on the landscape of the workforce development sector – in the Project on Workforce's Working to Learn research, only 35 percent of programs mentioned employer partnerships.

However, the form and intensity of employer engagement varied measurably. Some organizations (30 percent) indicated in general terms that they would work with employers, but did not specify how. A larger share (52 percent) were more specific – they included references to particular employers they had worked with in the past or would be engaging as part of the proposed program. The largest share of organizations worked in an advisory or advocacy capacity – aiming to help employers and policymakers support more equitable practices that would enable immigrant workers to thrive in the economy. Others, though, featured more direct employment relationships. Twenty-four percent of applicants had direct hiring relationships with employers for full-time positions. In other cases, employers provided coaching and mentorship to prospective workers or work-based training like internships and/or apprenticeships, but these were a relatively small share of programs (13 percent and eight percent, respectively). Five percent of organizations that applied for the funding were direct employers of immigrants themselves.

For organizations focused on advising employers, many aimed to invest in building the economic case for hiring refugees and immigrants, as well as increasing worker voice towards creating an equitable workplace.

- *For instance, one organization that is focused on driving systems change proposed a model that "teaches businesses multiple techniques that will help them in the future." The proposed training would include fundamentals for employers such as "understanding collateral consequences and implicit bias", examining state laws to ensure "fair hiring practices", and guidance from "a trained professional certified in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion."*

We also observed models that actively incorporate employers' inputs in program design.

- *For instance, one organization that is focused on worker-driven social responsibility programs noted that workers would establish "worker committees" to organize employer practice change and employers could engage directly with the "worker committees" to share how changes impact the business. According to this organization, this symbiotic relationship would work towards a goal of fostering "more effective communication between workers and their employers."*
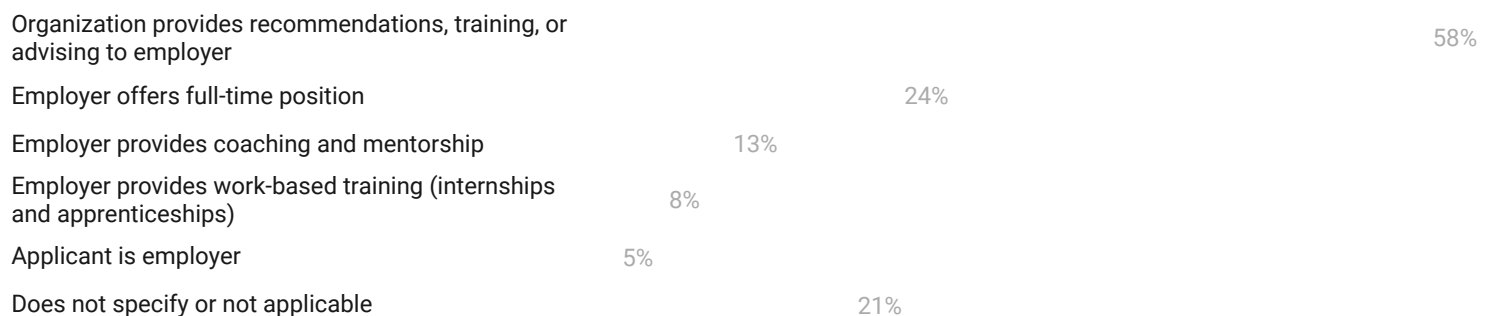
Thirty-three percent of organizations had some kind of focus on advocacy. These applicants tended to emphasize public narrative and changing public perceptions, especially through workers' own voices.

- *For example, one organization proposed providing individualized support to help frontline workers deploy a campaign that creates "empathy that begins to undo the structural marginalization of frontline workers." This advocacy campaign would "give space and resources for [frontline workers] to tell their own stories" and to "honor their lived experiences and create the opportunity for wider-scale employer behavior change."*

Additionally, some of these organizations proposed using organizing as a means to advocate for employer practice change.

- *For instance, one organization engages immigrant workers by giving them a platform that allows them to "drive systems change." According to the organization, "workers [can] come together to voice their concerns and set their own agenda for change." To do this, the organization leverages "the wide influence of our base and community presence" to connect workers with each other and amplify their voices. The organization was able to pilot this model in early 2021 by launching a campaign that brought together 3,000 workers who marched to improve conditions for delivery workers. As a result, NYC council members introduced legislation that addressed their concerns.*

Figure 12. Employer involvement*

Organization provides recommendations, training, or advising to employer	58%
Employer offers full-time position	24%
Employer provides coaching and mentorship	13%
Employer provides work-based training (internships and apprenticeships)	8%
Applicant is employer	5%
Does not specify or not applicable	21%

Created with Datawrapper

*Categories are not mutually-exclusive. Applicants could be classified under multiple
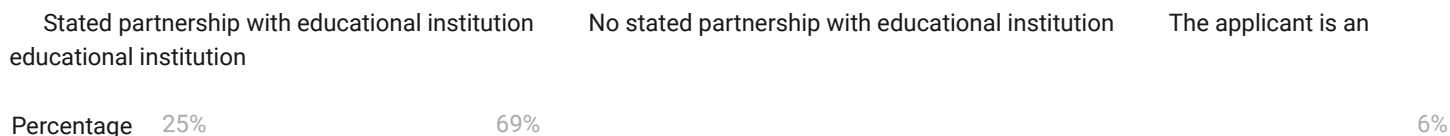
Most organizations focused on immigrant advancement operate outside the traditional American education system.

Only one-quarter of WES applicants mentioned working with the secondary or postsecondary education system in their programs. Six percent of the applicant set comprised formal educational institutions like a college or high school. Another quarter of organizations mentioned active partnerships with an educational institution. Examples include:

- *One Virginia-based organization offers five complementary programs, including restaurant industry certifications and bilingual culinary training from a local community college, tuition-free.*

- *A national organization spoke about its partnership with the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE), which helps "build our instruction infrastructure and develop our curriculum portfolio."*

- *One program has operated for 31 years and offers basic literacy classes and workforce training classes through partnerships with North Carolina's Community College System. Their new program would focus specifically on providing apprenticeship opportunities for immigrants and training employers in areas such as sponsorship of foreign-born employees and developing a leadership pipeline for these workers.*

The fact that the majority of the applicants did not mention partnerships with accredited educational partners, however, suggests a potential growth area for the field. Nearly 25 percent of U.S. immigrant adults do not have a high school degree (compared to ~16 percent of U.S.-born adults), and workers who lack educational credentials tend to face barriers accessing good jobs in the U.S. labor market. More programs may wish to consider integrating secondary and postsecondary credits and partnerships into their models.

Figure 13. Educational partnerships

	Stated partnership with educational institution	No stated partnership with educational institution	The applicant is an educational institution
Percentage	25%	69%	6%

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Programs for immigrant workers tend to focus on skills to enter the labor market, rather than skills to advance.

For programs intended to help immigrants navigate job transitions, we also wanted to understand whether they focused on entry-level or more advanced skills. Notably, we found the largest share of organizations (63 percent) mentioned teaching skills focused on workforce entry. In contrast, 31 percent mentioned a focus on upskilling, or building skills aimed towards promotion or advancement into higher-wage roles.

Given that many workers with the highest needs for support have lower levels of previous education, this focus is not surprising. It may be an operational necessity for small organizations to focus on breadth, and therefore prioritize general, entry-level skills that could apply across industries. In addition, many organizations appeared

to characterize English language learning as an entry-level skill, even though language skills are relevant across the entire labor market.

Regardless, there seems to be an opportunity for more focus on advancement. This could require longer-duration interventions – not just focusing on getting workers into their first employment opportunity in the United States, but helping support them on the job and connecting them to upward mobility opportunities over time.

Changing funding incentives may help in this shift. Many public funding sources, for instance, focus on employment rate as the primary success metric. This can encourage programs to focus on quick job placement, with less consideration towards job quality. In addition, employer partnerships represent an important opportunity to target advancement opportunities, since companies themselves are actually the largest source of funding for training of incumbent workers.

Given that many immigrants have credentials and qualifications from their home countries, we were also interested in whether organizations were helping workers transition those experiences into the U.S. labor market. This seems to still be a nascent area of focus. Only about five percent of organizations in the dataset mentioned in their LOI that they wanted to help immigrant workers transfer prior qualifications in the U.S. context. This represents another interesting opportunity for impact for both existing organizations and new entrants in the field.

The field appears to be moving towards prioritizing job quality.

The U.S. workforce development sector more broadly is beginning to focus more on whether it prepares people for "good jobs." Given this shift in the field, we wanted to analyze how prevalent a focus on job quality appeared to be in immigrant-serving organizations. There were not any questions in the LOI specifically addressing job quality, so instead we looked across applicant responses for themes. In each application, we analyzed the organization's responses to see if they cited an emphasis on the following three criteria: (1) increasing wages; (2) promotion/career advancement and (3) creating a safe and inclusive work environment. Over half (52 percent) of organizations in the dataset stated they were focused on at least one of these areas. An additional 15 organizations (11 percent) mentioned job quality in their application, but did not specify how they would operationalize it. Approximately one-third of organizations (36 percent) did not mention job quality or related criteria.

The LOI did not include enough detail for us to look at job quality for particular roles or occupations targeted. However, most applicants included some information about industry focus. The most common industry cited was healthcare (19 percent), followed by technology (12 percent). These industries can be good targets for workforce development efforts, given their job growth rates and advancement pathways. They also already have high shares of immigrant workers. Service sector jobs also appeared to be common targets, including hospitality, food service, and retail. Job quality metrics are typically more mixed for these industries, though we don't have enough information to evaluate definitively which roles applicants were targeting.

Some organizations promoted entrepreneurship as the route to economic mobility for immigrants. A significant subset (18 percent (n=24)) of programs focused on entrepreneurship, supporting immigrants who wanted to launch new companies or grow small businesses through technical assistance, training, or financing. Entrepreneurial programs spanned a diverse range of industries, including textile manufacturing, the creative industry, and culinary.

Figure 14. Most common industries

COVID-19 brought new challenges to immigrant-serving organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a large impact on programs serving immigrant workers. Many programs (18 percent overall, 34 percent of organizations that mentioned COVID-19) noted that the pandemic exacerbated or changed challenges already faced by the immigrant and refugee populations that they were trying to serve. Another subset (20 percent overall, 37 percent of organizations that mentioned COVID-19) of organizations started new programs or offered additional services during the pandemic, ranging from supplying their staff with PPE to switching job training to be fully virtual. For example:

- *One organization focused on making ethically and sustainably produced scrubs pivoted quickly to produce over 80,000 masks at the beginning of the pandemic.*

- *Another program was forced to shut down in-person operations and implement a hiring freeze shifted to providing online courses for English language learning and other skill development and used volunteers to work one-on-one with clients to go through the courses virtually.*

Future Horizons

With America's companies facing labor shortages, skill mismatches, and changing demographics, immigrants' role in the U.S. economy is only becoming more critical. Yet, many immigrants face unnecessary frictions and discrimination in the labor market. Helping immigrants maximize their human potential is good for workers and the country at large.

This report begins to build our understanding of the growing set of organizations that aim to contribute towards this mission. However, many important questions remain about the role that employers, educators, and nonprofits should play in increasing economic mobility for immigrants and refugees.

Our research highlights one encouraging development – organizations are increasingly focused on the broader employment ecosystem, not just preparing for a single job. Many workforce development providers are expanding their work beyond job training to create better supports and employment transitions for immigrants. In particular, we see a strong push towards changing employer practices to create more inclusive environments. We are also encouraged by the growing focus on job quality across advocacy, advisory, and direct service.

This report also identifies topics where there is a need for new models and investment. We highlight five key areas for increased focus from funders and implementers:

- **Transferability of skills and credentials:** Helping immigrants translate past experience from other countries to the U.S. context.

- **More work-integrated learning:** Access to paid, work-based learning experiences like apprenticeships and internships, with the necessary wraparound supports to support equity, persistence, and completion.

- **Career mobility:** Continued access to support for longer-term residents, not just recent arrivals and more focus on building skills to advance in the workforce, not just to enter the U.S. labor market.

- **Educational partnerships:** More opportunities to earn credits from high schools and colleges so that learning can count towards a credential.

- **Geographic diversity:** Supporting proximate leaders and scaling organizational growth in areas like the Sun Belt, where large shares of U.S. immigrants reside.

Finally, our work is limited by the lack of evidence about results of different interventions and models. Research is still behind the pace of change in the field. We don't know much yet about which models have worked specifically for immigrant populations and why. The evidence base on which types of approaches from non-

profits or social enterprises actually lead to employer practice change is extremely limited. Understanding the efficacy of different efforts will be critical moving forward, especially for advisory and advocacy models. Forward-looking organizations that invest in understanding impact can move the needle on two important goals: contributing to a more productive and competitive U.S. economy while also helping immigrants achieve the American dream.

Appendix

Notes on Methodology

The first round of funding includes 84 applicants and the second round of funding includes applications for 61 organizations. The combined dataset includes 145 applications and 143 organizations; however, two duplicate applications were removed (they applied to both rounds of funding) and a further 12 applications were removed since their applications were deemed irrelevant to immigrant and refugee workforce development.

Not all of the questions were consistent between the first and second rounds of applications, which limited our ability to link all responses across the same variables. Some categories of analysis draw from a smaller sample size. This was because the second round application included additional questions.

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About the Workforce Almanac

The Project on Workforce's Workforce Almanac is a new effort to build a comprehensive new national data source and evidence base about the workforce development sector and job training organizations and programs. Learn more at pw.hks.harvard.edu/post/the-almanac.

Workforce Almanac Research Leads

Alexis Gable (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and **Tessa Forshaw** (Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Science) co-head the Workforce Almanac research team. Their comments and contributions to the analytical strategy and qualitative coding methodology for this work were invaluable.

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