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Employment in quality jobs that pay a living wage is a key element for preventing and ending homelessness—yet millions of homeless jobseekers nationwide face significant barriers to getting, keeping, and advancing in employment.

Under the newly-passed Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the public workforce system aims to increase employment and economic opportunity for jobseekers facing barriers to employment, including homeless jobseekers. At the same time, there is growing awareness and accountability in the homeless services system around increasing employment and economic opportunity for people experiencing homelessness.

WIOA allows states to submit Combined State Plans describing how the workforce and homeless services systems can work together. This is a unique opportunity for these systems to align services to help meet their shared goal of increasing employment and economic opportunity among homeless jobseekers.

This brief provides homeless services stakeholders with ideas for leveraging the combined state planning process to support the employment needs and interests of homeless jobseekers. The WIOA Planning & Implementation Toolkit provides additional tools to help stakeholders ensure that the public workforce system under WIOA increases employment and economic opportunity for jobseekers facing barriers to employment, including homeless jobseekers.
National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity
Heartland Alliance’s National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity is dedicated to ending chronic unemployment and poverty. We believe that every person deserves the opportunity to succeed in work and support themselves and their families. Through our field building, we provide support and guidance that fosters more effective and sustainable employment efforts. Our policy and advocacy work advances solutions to the systemic issues that drive chronic unemployment.

Our national initiatives include:
The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN)
The National Center on Employment & Homelessness (NCEH)
Black Men Overcoming Barriers & Realizing Employment (B.MORE) Initiative
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Introduction

Most people experiencing homelessness want to work or are working but are not earning enough to make ends meet. Individuals experiencing homelessness consistently rank paid employment alongside healthcare and housing as a primary need. What’s more, when given the opportunity to work, the vast majority of individuals facing barriers to employment do so. People experience homelessness and housing instability for many reasons including financial insecurity, lack of affordable housing, and difficulty accessing services such as medical care, among other reasons. Many individuals who are homeless have worked before or may be currently working but not earning enough to keep a stable roof over their heads. Many people identify unemployment as a primary cause of their homelessness.

There is growing awareness and accountability around increasing employment and economic opportunity among homeless jobseekers. The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, Opening Doors, highlights the importance of increasing economic security for people experiencing homelessness, signaling a federal commitment to address the lack of earned income as one of the drivers of homelessness. As homeless service systems across the country implement the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (HEARTH Act), communities will be required to demonstrate changes in employment income for adults, youth, and families experiencing homelessness as they exit the homeless services system. Moreover, the public workforce system under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) allows for states to submit Combined State Plans describing how the workforce and homeless systems can work together, which presents a unique opportunity to align services and improve the employment outcomes of people experiencing homelessness.

Despite federal and state opportunities and great need, too few communities have taken steps to orient and strengthen workforce and homeless system collaborations to meet the employment interests and needs of homeless jobseekers. WIOA’s passage and implementation can serve as a catalyst in communities and states for doing so.
The passage and implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) has the potential to catalyze efforts in local communities and states to address the employment needs and interests of a greater share of adults, youth, and families who are unstably housed or experiencing homelessness.

WIOA modernizes the federal framework that guides America’s public workforce system. The law prioritizes and acknowledges the need for workforce services and supports for adults and youth facing barriers to employment—including homeless jobseekers—to a greater degree than its predecessor, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). WIOA also provides flexibility to implement promising practices for connecting chronically unemployed individuals to work. WIOA articulates that one of the goals of the public workforce system is to prepare individuals—especially individuals facing barriers to employment—to succeed in the labor market through increased access to employment opportunities, education, training, and support services. Homeless jobseekers are defined as one of the populations of individuals facing barriers to employment. Subsequent federal guidance instructs the public workforce system under WIOA to prioritize and direct resources to serve low-income adults and out-of-school youth.

**WIOA Definition of Homelessness**

WIOA’s definition of homelessness is inclusive of adults, youth, and families who might not be considered homeless in other contexts or under other definitions of homelessness. This creates a unique opportunity to leverage employment and support services for a wide range of individuals who may be unstably housed as a homeless prevention strategy and/or to ensure housing stability once housing has been secured. The terms “homeless,” “homeless individual,” and “homeless person” under WIOA mean:

- An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
- An individual who—(I) is sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; (II) is living in a motel, hotel, trailer park, or campground due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; (III) is living in an emergency or transitional shelter; (IV) is abandoned in a hospital; or (V) is awaiting foster care placement;
- An individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; or
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because the children are living in the circumstances described.
Realizing the goals of increased access to employment, training, education, and support services on behalf of homeless jobseekers will require concerted and deliberate efforts by local communities and states and a number of stakeholders, including those in the homeless services system. Fortunately, joint state planning opportunities, such as the development of a **Combined State Plan** between the public workforce system and the homeless services system, can help realize these goals. Stakeholders in the homeless services system who recognize the need to increase employment and economic opportunity among homeless jobseekers can enrich these efforts through their contributions, guidance, and support.

This brief offers practical ideas and actionable recommendations for how homeless services stakeholders can help shape the WIOA planning and implementation process.
I. WIOA Combined State Planning & How It Can Benefit Homeless Jobseekers

WIOA allows states to develop Combined State Plans to guide their public workforce system in coordination with a number of public systems and partners, including employment and training activities carried out by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This section provides an overview of combined state planning and explains how WIOA and HUD combined state planning can benefit homeless jobseekers.

WIOA statute offers the flexibility for states to develop statewide plans to guide their public workforce system in coordination with a number of public systems and partners. At minimum, states must develop joint plans with WIOA core programs through the state’s unified planning process. States may choose to develop combined plans with the WIOA core programs and one or more other public system including but not limited to:

- the state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program;
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T);
- employment and training activities carried out by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which include the Community Development Block Grant program, Continuum of Care, Family Self-Sufficiency program, Jobs Plus program, and the Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency program;
- Community Services Block Grant employment and training activities; and/or
- Second Chance Act reentry programs, including the REO (formerly REXO) program.

Public Workforce System Primer for Homeless System Stakeholders

The public workforce system’s flow of funding, governance structure, and organization under WIOA has not changed dramatically from what it looked like under its predecessor, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). This primer provides an overview of the system.

i. WIOA includes six core programs: Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth formula grants under Title I; adult education state grants under Title II; Wagner-Peyser Employment Services under Title III; and vocational rehabilitation state grants under Title IV.
States are required to include a number of strategic and operational elements in their state plans. According to the Department of Labor, Combined State Plans that include employment and training activities carried out by HUD should consider those activities as part of a coordinated anti-poverty and workforce development strategy.

As part of the Combined State Plan, the relevant lead agency in a state:

- must describe how the state and the eligible entities will coordinate the provision of employment and training activities and other relevant supportive services through statewide and local WIOA workforce development systems; and
- may provide examples of innovative employment and training programs and activities conducted by grantees as part of a larger anti-poverty and employment strategy.7

Combined state planning has the potential to be even more important given that employment programs carried out by HUD—which, according to draft DOL guidance, include the Community Development Block Grant program, Continuum of Care, Family Self-Sufficiency program, Jobs Plus program, and the Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency program—will be required partners of the one-stop system.8 Under WIOA requirements, required partners will be responsible for providing access to the programs or activities under their jurisdiction through the one-stop delivery system. They will also be responsible for working collaboratively with the state and local WIOA boards to establish and maintain the one-stop delivery system, which includes funding the one-stop system’s infrastructure and participating in its operation.9

If conducted in a deliberate and thoughtful way, combined state planning efforts by the WIOA system and HUD-funded employment services in states can help maximize resources and ensure that a greater share of homeless jobseekers have access to workforce services and supports.

Given the increased accountability to demonstrate employment and earnings increases for homeless jobseekers through the HEARTH ACT, and the reality that the success of rapid rehousing across the country depends on families having reliable and sufficient earnings, joint planning with the public workforce system is critical to achieving desired outcomes for individuals and families experiencing homelessness.
Indeed, effective combined planning processes between the public workforce system and homeless services system can:

- ensure the identification, offering, and implementation of a robust menu of employment and support services for adult and youth homeless jobseekers;
- help identify and implement effective referral processes between the public workforce and homeless services systems and partners;
- help identify new or expanded workforce and support service resources;
- use existing resources wisely and most effectively; and
- increase the likelihood that homeless jobseekers can access and receive appropriate workforce services by seeding innovative system coordination ideas such as the inclusion of employment supports in coordinated access and assessment processes, co-location of homeless and workforce services, and the use of employment navigators, among others.

Given the increased accountability to demonstrate employment and earnings increases for homeless jobseekers through the HEARTH ACT, and the reality that the success of rapid rehousing across the country depends on families having reliable and sufficient earnings, joint planning with the public workforce system is critical to achieving desired outcomes for individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

ii. In addition to the core programs, required partners include the Senior Community Service Employment Program; job counseling, training, and placement services for veterans authorized under chapter 41 of title 38; career and technical postsecondary education programs authorized under the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006; Trade Adjustment Assistance Programs; employment and training activities carried out under the Community Services Block Grant; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) employment and training programs; Unemployment Compensation programs; programs authorized under the Second Chance Act of 2007, Section 212 (reintegration of ex-offenders); and programs authorized under the Social Security Act Title IV, Part A (TANF), unless the Governor determines that TANF is not a required partner. Optional partners may include, with the approval of the local board and chief elected officials, the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) employment and training program (i.e. Ticket to Work programs); Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP) employment and training programs; the Vocational Rehabilitation Client Assistance Program; National and Community Service Act Programs; and other employment, education or training programs such as those operated by libraries or in the private sector.
How the Homeless Services System Can Shape the WIOA Combined State Planning Process

Homeless services stakeholders can guide and support the WIOA combined state planning process to help ensure that Combined State Plans meet the needs and interests of homeless jobseekers. This section offers homeless services stakeholders actionable recommendations for influencing the development and quality of Combined State Plans between the WIOA system and HUD-funded employment services.

Homeless services stakeholders who recognize the importance of increasing employment and economic opportunity among homeless jobseekers can contribute to, guide, and support efforts to develop Combined State Plans between the WIOA and state HUD-funded employment services systems. These stakeholders are likely to best understand the needs of adult, youth, and families experiencing homelessness and how the workforce system can be leveraged to support their needs. Here are practical ways that stakeholders within the homeless services system can influence the development and quality of WIOA Combined State Plans between the WIOA system and HUD-funded employment services.

Get Involved in WIOA State and Local Planning Groups.
Homeless service system stakeholders—particularly Continua of Care and community-based homeless service providers—should approach public workforce system leaders and ask to be involved in WIOA planning efforts. Stakeholders should target local and state chief elected officials, local and state WIOA board leaders, and relevant state and local agencies responsible for WIOA services.

Looking for Additional Resources?
Our WIOA Planning & Implementation Toolkit offers a range of resources to support efforts to increase access to employment, training, education, and support services for adult and youth jobseekers facing barriers to employment.
Local workforce boards, specifically, have the option of including representatives of community-based service organizations with demonstrated experience and expertise serving jobseekers facing barriers to employment on their planning bodies. However, the onus will likely be on community-based service organizations to approach local public workforce system leaders, ask to be part of leadership bodies, and share their perspectives. Homeless services stakeholders should come to the planning table with knowledge of the characteristics of homeless jobseekers and what employment services homeless jobseekers in the local community or state are currently accessing. These stakeholders should also bring their knowledge of these jobseekers’ employment needs and interests as well as their experience supporting those needs and interests.

Finally, homeless services stakeholders are in the unique position to ensure that people with lived experience have a place at the WIOA planning table and that their voices are heard in the development of state plans. Homeless services stakeholders should make every effort to encourage the inclusion of homeless jobseekers in the WIOA planning process in order to ensure the process is informed by authentic lived experience.

Harness Relevant State Agency Leaders to Shape WIOA Combined State Planning Processes.
Neither the WIOA system nor the homeless services system can accomplish the goal of increasing access to employment, education, training, and support services for homeless jobseekers on its own. If their state is not already doing so, stakeholders in the homeless services system should urge their state to engage in WIOA combined state planning with HUD-funded employment services. Stakeholders should encourage relevant lead agencies responsible for HUD-funded employment services to get involved.

As part of the WIOA planning process, relevant state agency leaders responsible for HUD-funded employment services should be prepared to communicate:

- the characteristics, employment needs and interests of people experiencing homelessness, and what employment services homeless jobseekers in the local community or state are accessing;
- the workforce programs and support services offered through HUD-funded employment services;
- the eligible populations for HUD-funded employment services and populations currently served;
- what HUD-funded employment services are offered where;
- the unmet needs of participants served; and
- how WIOA services could enhance the HUD-funded employment services currently offered.
Support the Identification of Innovative Employment and Training Programs for Homeless Jobseekers.
If a state chooses to do combined state planning, one of the roles of the relevant agency responsible for HUD-funded employment services is to help identify innovative employment and training programs, practices, principles, and models for homeless jobseekers. Stakeholders in the homeless services system—especially researchers, Continuum of Care leaders, and philanthropy—can inform this process by performing or supporting literature reviews, scanning state and local workforce programs and innovations across the country, and engaging with experts in the field.

Urge the Inclusion of Adult and/or Youth Homeless Jobseekers as Priority Populations for Workforce Services.
Homeless services stakeholders should engage local and state WIOA planners and those responsible for shepherding WIOA plans to encourage the inclusion of purpose statements in local and state plans that mirror the federal WIOA legislative goal around expanding access to employment opportunities, education, training, and support services for adult and youth jobseekers facing barriers to employment.

Stakeholders should also encourage that state and local WIOA plans reflect the federal WIOA statutory requirement that adults receiving public assistance, other low-income individuals, and individuals who are basic skills deficient will be given priority for adult employment and training activities as well as the federal requirement that not less than 75 percent of youth funds are spent on out-of-school youth.

Homeless services stakeholders may want to encourage local WIOA plans to specifically target employment strategies or access to services to adult and youth homeless jobseekers. Employment services could also be targeted to subpopulations of homeless jobseekers such as families participating in rapid rehousing, youth experiencing homelessness, veterans, or others.

Help Inform the Development of Appropriate WIOA Performance Measures.
Historically, jobseekers facing barriers to employment have had difficulty accessing employment services through the public workforce system because of how the system was held accountable for achieving outcomes.

The U.S. Departments of Labor and Education are developing a new statistical model to measure state and local WIOA performance that is based on economic conditions and participant characteristics. This new performance accountability model should better reflect the experiences and employment trajectories of jobseekers who may face more difficulty getting and keeping employment and, ideally, should reduce disincentives to serving these jobseekers. In developing the statistical model, the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education will use factors such as poor work history, lack of work experience, lack of education or occupational skills attainment, dislocation from high-wage and high-benefit employment, low levels of literacy, low levels of English proficiency, disability status, homelessness, ex-offender status, and welfare dependency.9

The Working to End Homelessness Toolkit offers a wealth of information about populations experiencing homelessness, evidence-based employment models, and components of employment services for homeless jobseekers.

Homeless services stakeholders should ensure that negotiated WIOA performance measures reflect the experiences and characteristics of homeless jobseekers.
Still, local WIOA plans must include a description of negotiated levels of performance for their specific geographic area. Homeless services stakeholders should ensure that negotiated performance measures reflect the experiences and characteristics of homeless jobseekers and/or priority populations, if such groups have been identified. Understanding the characteristics of homeless jobseekers in the local community and their employment experiences, successes, and challenges is important to supporting the development of performance measures that take into account the factors that can influence employment success over time.

Monitor the System & Support Continuous Improvement. Because efforts by states and local communities to increase employment and economic opportunity for homeless jobseekers may be a new, expanded, or renewed undertaking, it is important that stakeholders monitor and evaluate efforts periodically.

Local WIOA governance boards are required to review the local WIOA plan every two years—a natural point-in-time opportunity to evaluate efforts to increase access to employment, education, training, and support services for adult and youth homeless jobseekers.\textsuperscript{10}

Homeless services stakeholders should encourage the development of accountability mechanisms in order to ensure that purpose statements, goals, and priority of service requirements are monitored and upheld over time. These accountability mechanisms could come in the form of benchmarks for engaging and serving target population groups or the development of policies at the local level to ensure that these populations are prioritized and receive services that meet their needs.

Stakeholders should also take steps to monitor the system’s progress and create monitoring opportunities. For example, stakeholders could advocate for the development of annual reports detailing the system’s progress in meeting homeless jobseekers’ employment needs and interests. Monitoring could also come in the form of annual meetings with WIOA local and state leaders and other public agency leaders to discuss progress engaging and serving homeless jobseekers.

Finally, planning processes such as combined state planning often reveal misconceptions or misinformation. In particular, these processes may surface misconceptions about the characteristics of adult and youth homeless jobseekers, culture and orientation differences between systems, or other myths. To address these misconceptions, homeless services stakeholders can play an important role in supporting cross-training efforts between WIOA leaders and partners and the homeless services system with the goal of increasing expertise to address the employment, education, training, and service needs of homeless jobseekers.

Stakeholders can advocate for the development of annual reports detailing the public workforce system’s progress in meeting homeless jobseekers’ employment needs and interests.

Combined state planning processes may surface misconceptions about the characteristics of homeless jobseekers. To address this, homeless services stakeholders can support cross-training efforts between WIOA leaders and partners and the homeless services system.
Conclusion

Major revisions to America’s public laws happen rarely. Now is the time for homeless services stakeholders to help shape the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act’s (WIOA) planning and implementation—an undertaking that can have lasting and far-reaching positive effects for homeless jobseekers.

Given the economic and social costs of chronic unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, working to meet the employment needs and interests of these jobseekers must be priority in states and communities.

Leveraging the local and state planning processes and other opportunities embedded in WIOA, stakeholders can achieve the goals of increasing employment and economic opportunity for adult and youth homeless jobseekers now and into the future.
References

7. Ibid.
10. Ibid.