

DRAFT REPORT

Task Force on Talent First Economics

Institute for Emerging Issues

North Carolina State University

November 2022

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Overview

North Carolina is facing a workforce supply issue for many reasons, including a declining birth rate, the retirement of baby boomers, limited childcare options, etc. With labor force participation below pre-pandemic levels, there is a renewed commitment to take action. To address this challenge, the Institute for Emerging Issues (IEI) at NC State University believes that we need to tap into the state's talent supply and engage workers who, whether historically, systemically, or due to the COVID-19 pandemic, have faced challenges to entering and staying engaged in the workforce.

Talent First Economics and the 2023 Emerging Issues Forum are shining a light on how we can better connect underrepresented workers to jobs and how key systems must transform to meet the needs of an evolving workforce. By putting talent first, we can better energize, equip and unleash North Carolina's full abundance of talent.

While many North Carolinians face workforce barriers, an advisory committee helped IEI narrow down five groups for the purposes of Talent First Economics. We must also acknowledge that many underrepresented workers identify with more than one of these groups, making their challenges more complex to address.

- Justice-Involved
- Individuals with Disabilities/Neurodiversity
- Opportunity Youth (ages 16-24, not in school or working)
- Transitioning Military and their Families
- Families with Young Children

Task Force on Talent First Economics

Having the right people at the table from the start is crucial for forming and influencing effective policy. On September 9, 2022, with a grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, IEI convened the Task Force on Talent First Economics. The task force, led by IEI Practitioner-in-Residence Philip Cooper and NCWorks Commission Executive Director Annie Izod, was made up of more than 70 experts, including employees and others with lived experience in the five identified groups, those with a deep understanding of the workforce system, employers who have hired workers from these five groups, and nonprofits working directly with these communities.

There is a lot we already know about these North Carolinians and their needs, but there is also a lot to learn, and unlearn, when it comes to their workforce potential. During their first meeting in September 2022, task force members broke into five working groups corresponding with the five groups listed above to make an initial assessment of the challenges preventing these groups from connecting with the North Carolina labor market. Together, they developed an initial set of recommendations that leaders can take action on now to grow North Carolina's talent supply. Additional meetings took place in the fall, with the work of the task force culminating at its final meeting on November 2, 2022.

This report summarizes the initial recommendations that emerged from the task force. The recommendations will be further refined through the February 13, 2023

Emerging Issues Forum, where additional stakeholders are invited to share feedback, provide further context and suggest additional recommendations. After the Forum, a refined set of strategies will be published and disseminated statewide. IEI will promote the recommendations with key stakeholders and support up to five regions in moving a set of recommendations forward.

As you read through the recommendations and tactics, consider the following questions and share your responses at go.ncsu.edu/recommendations-feedback. IEI will collect feedback through March 13, 2023.

1. What is your general feedback on these recommendations and tactics? What amendments or further context do you want to offer?
2. Are there promising practices in North Carolina or elsewhere that could serve as a model?
3. What else can be done to remove barriers to successfully engaging these groups in the workforce? What other tactics can be applied at the individual, local, regional and statewide level?

Justice-Involved

All the populations addressed in the IEI Task Force on Talent First Economics deal with varying degrees of bias, prejudice and stigma. One group that faces significant stigma is the justice-involved population. While they have served the time to which they are sentenced, these workers experience significant challenges due to the assumptions and stereotypes attached to them. This task force working group prioritized the following challenges:

- Systems are difficult to navigate
- Workforce re-entry programs are under resourced
- Public safety fears limit opportunities

North Carolina incarcerates between 20,000 and 25,000 individuals per year, on average. Most of whom are 30-39 years of age. White women far outnumber other races behind bars: 82% admitted versus 14% Black women and 2% Hispanic women. Among male inmates, Black men are admitted significantly more often than other groups: 56% Black men versus 37% white men and 2% Hispanic men.

Challenge: Systems are difficult to navigate

The NC Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) offers several services and initiatives to prepare these individuals for release back into their community¹. These include life skills programs intended to develop cognitive skills for basic decision

¹ North Carolina Department of Public Safety, "Fiscal Year 2021-2022 Annual Statistical Report," <https://www.ncdps.gov/media/10884/open>

making and problem solving, as well as educational programs such as literacy training, GED preparation, vocational training and even applied associates and bachelor's degrees. However, there is a lack of clarity concerning what is available and when they are eligible to participate. There also appears to be a lack of consistency in program and staff across facility types and geography.

While members of the justice-involved working group were fully aware of programs put into place by both NCDPS and by grass-roots community organizations, they extensively discussed the underutilization of resources by newly released persons who need help navigating the systems involved. There was consensus in the opinion that programs are designed for ease of administration by bureaucrats rather than for meeting the needs of the population. Programmatic staff have often not had to navigate the systems they implement and manage. There is also a belief that some program administrators themselves exhibit prejudice against the justice-involved, which may drive prospective beneficiaries away from such programs. *Community navigators*, such as community health workers with specialized training in justice involvement, can provide critical navigation support but are in short supply.

Recommendation: Make workforce support and other resources more accessible to those transitioning out of the justice system.

Tactics to explore:

- Review and update existing resources. Ensure that people with lived experience and organizations working with these populations are leading the review process.
- Invest in community health workers with specialized training with justice involvement who can help navigate the systems and support greater inter-agency partnerships.
- Ensure that trusted support services are located close to employers and workforce development organizations in order to influence and advocate for accessible, relevant services and resources.

Challenge: Workforce re-entry programs are under resourced

Many local and community-based nonprofits in the justice-involved space lack the organizational capacity to access programmatic funding to maximize their impact. Compounding this challenge is that many justice-involved individuals are not eligible for services offered through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the largest funder of workforce programs. While inter-agency partnerships are an effective way to reduce the duplication and replication of services, more support is needed.

Recommendation: Increase the capacity of organizations that support justice-involved individuals.

Tactics to explore:

- Centralized grant-subgrant models in which community-based organizations can secure grant funding to award subgrants to smaller re-entry programs.
Organizations with the capacity to manage grant funding could develop funding relationships that facilitate and provide infrastructure lacking in smaller counterparts.
- Funding should be made available to local re-entry councils to initiate pilot programs, led by people with lived experience, focusing on gaps in services and building capacity.

Challenge: Public safety fears limit opportunities

The working group commented on several occasions that justice-involved individuals are often viewed as a public safety matter, doing a disservice to these individuals and to the community at large. They shared that most justice-involved individuals are survivors, often traveling a trajectory that began with violence in the home and/or trauma within their community networks, sometimes leading to further disruptions, academic failure, and antisocial behavior. All agreed that more interventions and support are needed to keep young people out of this pipeline in the first place. But for those who do become justice-involved, stereotypes can be combated by shifting the focus from “public safety” to “public health.” Public safety addresses crime, but if the goal is to protect the well-being of individuals, then it

becomes a public health issue. A major portion of the stigma attached to justice-involved persons is the fear generated by the public safety lens through which these individuals are viewed. However, matters such as trauma, domestic violence, substance abuse disorder, personality disorders and more are public health issues. Similarly, working group members argued that the public safety workforce needs to be educated to use a public health lens when working with justice-involved individuals.

Recommendation: Reframe the justice-involved narrative as a public health issue through education, training and public information campaigns.

Tactics to explore include:

- Use people-first language rather than impersonal institutional or sociological language.
- Educate direct service providers, corrections staff, business leaders and decision makers on issues facing justice-involved individuals by those with lived experience.

Individuals with Disabilities/Neurodiversity

Individuals with disabilities/neurodiversity are not always included in conversations around workforce engagement. Members of this working group reflected

the exhilaration and satisfaction of having the opportunity to be listened to, and to be *invited* to share their perspectives on the barriers they face in accessing the North Carolina labor market. This working group prioritized the following challenges:

- Systemic bias limits access to meaningful work.
- Employers need workers, and individuals with disabilities/neurodiversity need jobs, but they're not connecting.
- Workers with disabilities/neurodiversity do not have the support they need to pursue and maintain employment.

One in four, or 25%, of North Carolinians are disabled (CDC). This population is additionally disadvantaged by mental and physical challenges not directly attributable to their disabilities. For example, North Carolina's disabled population is 3.5 times more likely than abled persons to suffer from depression, 1.3 times more likely to be obese, and twice as likely to be diabetic². Most relevant to this project, studies show that persons with a disability are three times more likely not to be in the labor force than persons without a disability.

Challenge: Systemic bias limits access to meaningful work

The working group discussed at length the stereotypes and mental health stigma faced by individuals with disabilities/neurodiversity when trying to access the labor market. For example, prospective employers may make assumptions about one's

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disability & Health U.S. State Profile Data for North Carolina (Adults 18+ years of age)," <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/impacts/north-carolina.html>

capabilities due to a disability. In fact, there was a sentiment that some employers seem to look for reasons *not* to hire people with certain socially stigmatized profiles, such as those with substance abuse disorder, autism or personality disorders. They were very clear about the need to introduce employers to face-to-face encounters and to create educational opportunities for them.

Recommendation: Foster an “employment first” mindset to transform culture through inclusion in schools and in the workforce. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment First centers on the premise that all individuals, including those with the most significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in [Competitive Integrated Employment](#) and community life.

Tactics to explore include:

- Expand pathways and provide access to specialized training, upskilling, reskilling and apprenticeships.
- Increase funding for individualized services that help identify and connect individuals with internships, apprenticeships, and jobs that leverage skills and expertise in a meaningful way.

Challenge: Employers need workers, and individuals with disabilities/neurodiversity need jobs, but they’re not connecting

While the working group discussed the need for greater employer education on the topic, there was agreement that employer outreach is more effective when “education” is reframed as “partnership.” When employers are involved in these partnerships it provides for more collective impact. There was also agreement that connecting employers who have successfully diversified their workforce with disabled/neurodivergent employees with employers who had not yet done so would be beneficial. This would help employers see that disabled and neurodivergent individuals are being successful in their roles. In addition, many employers lack awareness of resources available to the disabled/neurodivergent community. Some employers do not have the staff and capacity for outreach. In the end, members agreed that employers need to be educated and that messaging was paramount.

Recommendation: Reframe employer education as employer/industry partnerships.

Tactics to explore include:

- Provide ongoing information and guidance about support services (e.g., transportation, coaches), mental health awareness, identifying career pathways and matching job skills with employer needs. Tailor information to the needs of employers, individuals and families in order to improve outcomes.
- Establish peer-to-peer partnerships among employers to reduce the demand on any one employer.

- Consolidate supports/point of contact to ease navigation of support services for disabled/neurodiverse employees.

Recommendation: Develop workforce ecosystems and collaborative partnerships with employers.

Tactics to explore include:

- Develop statewide disabled/neurodiverse employment ecosystems and create accelerators for skills development.
- Convene consortiums at the local level to connect businesses with disabled/neurodiverse job seekers.
- Curate conversations between support services organizations and businesses around employer needs, opportunities and employment success stories.
- Nurture relationships between support organizations and Human Resource officers to help connect disabled/neurodiverse job seekers with employment opportunities.
- Understanding intersectionality of these groups, leverage existing local service providers to support the needs of multiple populations.

Challenge: Workers with disabilities/neurodiversity do not have the support they need to pursue and maintain employment

Another obstacle discussed had to do with helping disabled/neurodivergent individuals who did secure employment to navigate their workplaces. According to the literature, people with disabilities are likely to be successful in employment if customized employment or evidence-based models are used first. Here, working group members spoke of the need for more work support specialists/coaches who can teach disabled/neurodivergent workers to self-advocate where possible and help them develop coping strategies for workplace environments. However, nonprofits and community-based organizations (CBO) often lack the budgets to pay competitive wages for job coaches who are often undertrained and underpaid. As a comparative analogy, members pointed out that there was a time when nurses were not certified. As certification became a requirement, nursing salaries grew in proportion. Other professionals that have lifted their direct care staff via certification paired with higher pay may offer applicable models.

Recommendation: Increase the capacity to deliver wrap-around support services through community health workers, job coaches, peer support specialists, and other workers that meet specific needs of those with disabilities (e.g., transport providers).

Tactics to explore include:

- Fund support services over a longer period of time and in a more effective and efficient manner.

- Reimburse agencies that hire Certified Employment Support Professional (CESP) job coaches.
- Integrate community health workers to address issues not traditionally related to employment, such as medication management.
- Elevate the job coach profession. Recognize that the work requires training and better pay, adding value and resources to those jobs so they are compensated accordingly and can make a career of being a job coach.
- Tailor funding to client needs and make resources more flexible.

Opportunity Youth

Opportunity Youth refers to the demographic of young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor employed in a job. This group also includes several sub-categories of young people, including those transitioning out of foster care, those considered “at risk,” and those who have been justice involved. The people and organizations working with this group are generally concerned with reconnecting these young people to community resources, exposing them to information about the career options available to them and the means to help them to get where they decide they want to go. This working group prioritized the following challenges:

- The workforce system can be difficult to navigate

- Limited alternative career pathways for opportunity youth
- Lack of exposure to career opportunities that are interesting and engaging to opportunity youth

Opportunity youth are almost twice as likely to live in poverty, three times more likely to have one or more disabilities, and eight times less likely to have finished high school, compared to their counterparts. Female opportunity youth are more than four times as likely to be mothers. In North Carolina, the rate of opportunity youth in 2019 was 11%, or approximately 141,000 individuals.

Challenge: The workforce system can be difficult to navigate

Opportunity youth come from a variety of backgrounds and family situations. Some come from traumatic backgrounds, particularly those transitioning from foster care or juvenile detention. Many must deal with the stigma of their own history of institutionalization, in addition to stereotypes of young people held by some adults. Under the circumstances, reconnecting these young adults with programs and opportunities that promote self-respect and self-sufficiency is as challenging as it is crucial.

The working group zeroed in on the need for these young adults to develop nurturing relationships with adults who can be their allies. Community navigators and advocates can assist youth with navigating education, healthcare and employment systems from start to finish. These navigators may be community health workers,

social workers, or other trusted community members. They have a critical role in direct outreach to youth and their families. They could advocate for their young friends or teach them to advocate for themselves. They would model adult self-sufficiency, work ethic and civic engagement. Such connections with trusted adults could also offer opportunities for disconnected young people to get more and better exposure to alternative career options and pathways.

Recommendation: Implement a network of “community navigators” who establish trust with opportunity youth and help them develop critical life skills.

Tactics to explore include:

- Identify and review state and nationally recognized certified community health worker and success coach programs that can provide scalable models for credentialing navigators and advocates.

Challenge: Limited alternative career pathways for opportunity youth

Standard public education prepares students to attend four-year colleges. That is understandable since college attendance is one of the metrics used to evaluate public school systems. However, some opportunity youth may not choose to attend a four-year college or university. They may be ill equipped or uninterested, or afraid of accumulating student debt. Others want to pursue skilled trade occupations that they

cannot always learn in college, and some simply may not know what their options are. By first identifying careers youth are interested in, we can determine what education and training will get them there. While higher education is one career pathway, more are needed. Creating and promoting alternatives to a traditional college route are increasingly important for opportunity youth.

Students need options. Multi-modal programming (i.e., curricula that adds experiential learning to classroom learning) takes education and career prep out of the walls of the school. A well-designed program provides apprenticeship and coaching in public and private sector jobs/careers. Students share what they want, need and desire, and that information can be used to create programs shaped around their needs. The concept of education can be flipped by making the state a laboratory for learning and career development. Another challenge the working group identified is that the most vulnerable students don't have transportation to get to their local community college for job training and/or education that can lead to certifications or credentials. By including such certifications, training and education in high school curricula, the transportation barrier in urban and rural communities can be overcome.

Recommendation: Develop and integrate workforce certification programs into high school curricula to link students to alternative career opportunities upon graduation.

Tactics to explore include:

- Now that certifications are legal to obtain during the school day, bring community college training to high schools to make it easier for youth to gain critical skills and credentials.

Challenge: Lack of exposure to career opportunities that are interesting and engaging to opportunity youth

Another challenge addressed was that young people and their families often are unaware of what types of education or training are needed for what types of jobs. Some young people from rural areas often believe they need to leave the area to earn a living because they are unfamiliar with the opportunities available nearby. Additionally, there are some occupations plagued by a lack of diversity that can convince some young people that “those jobs aren’t for people like me.”

Recommendation: Expand job and career shadowing programs tailored for opportunity youth.

Tactics to explore include:

- Develop a model that meets youth where they are, such as summer camps (elementary school), job shadowing programs (middle school) and workplace learning programs (high school).

- Engage opportunity youth around their needs and their vocational aspirations; evolve traditional education accordingly.
- Materials and resources promoting these job opportunities, education and workforce initiatives should be marketed in a way that attracts opportunity youth and is led by young people.

Transitioning Military and Families

The people of North Carolina frequently and earnestly convey their gratitude to current and former military members whenever they get the chance, so it might seem surprising that military veterans transitioning into civilian life would have difficulty finding jobs with civilian businesses. Their spouses and family members may also face challenges. Some choose to leave the state altogether after transitioning out of the military, especially younger veterans. This working group prioritized the following challenges:

- Excess of programs (“sea of goodwill”) that can make it difficult to know which services will provide the greatest benefit
- Employers need workers, and transitioning military and spouses need jobs—but they’re not connecting
- Biases and assumptions about military service members that limit opportunity

North Carolina is home to more military veterans than the national average (7.9% in NC versus 6.9% nationally). According to the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, almost half of NC veterans are 65 years or older, with most of them having served during the Vietnam War. Additionally, North Carolina veterans are nearly twice as likely to have a disability than non-veterans.

Challenge: Excess of programs (“sea of goodwill”) that can make it difficult to know which services will provide the greatest benefit

There is much that can be done to improve the processes attached with assisting veterans to move into civilian workplaces and financial self-sufficiency. Military service frequently leads to marketable, often technical skills, along with a personal discipline attractive to many employers. There are also multiple levels of outreach available, e.g., at military installations, at the local level through NCWorks, and at the state level through the DMVA Resource Guide. The Veterans Administration also has countless programs for transitioning service members who need to translate their skills into civilian language, attend college to acquire skills, purchase real estate and more. However, this “sea of goodwill,” is often difficult to access, especially for military spouses and those with children who may be unable to attend daytime, in-person events.

There was a shared sentiment that these programs appear to be designed for ease of administration by the bureaucrats who implement them, rather than for the

outcomes they provide for former service members. They spoke of impersonal, one-size-fits-all services that may work well for some but are not flexible enough to meet the needs of all. This sort of widget-making perspective on client services, regardless of the nature of the client population, is as ineffective as it is efficient. Services for transitioning veterans exist in abundance but such services need to be redesigned to be less rigid and better able to serve this client population.

Recommendation: Create a comprehensive online portal/guide to support services available to service members and their families, during and post transition.

Tactics to explore include:

- Consolidate information about all available resources into one portal and make it easier for people to conveniently access resources.
- Develop a comprehensive marketing plan for reaching veterans and their families.
- Leverage existing state resources and partnerships to bring awareness of these resources within the education and workforce system and encourage enhanced collaboration.
- Identify resources to manage inventory and quality of resource materials on an ongoing basis.

Challenge: Employers need workers, and transitioning military and spouses need jobs—but they’re not connecting

There was also consensus that military service personnel should connect with transitioning service providers as much as two years in advance of leaving their service. However, military units are often focused on what they are supposed to be doing in the present, leading to a lack of advocates to encourage them to start early or direct them to service providers.

Recommendation: Expand workforce development programming that provides industry connections and mentorship to transitioning military and their families.

Tactics to explore include:

- Enhance business engagement services within the local workforce boards and seek out promising practices from other communities.
- Continue to identify industries that need talent and develop connections with employers.
- Increase funding for workforce ecosystem development activities that promote connections, shared resources and community collaboration.
- Expand industry-led workforce development programs and training, and promote pathways through specialized training for veterans and spouses.

- Engage nonprofits that work with industries to expand programming and partnerships that provide employer connections and mentorship to transitioning military and their families.
- Work with employers, the UNC system and community colleges to honor and expedite transfer processes for skills, certifications, and licenses earned by military service members and spouses—across state lines and the private sector.

Challenge: Biases and assumptions about military service members that limit opportunity

In spite of the evident reverence in which military veterans are held across the state, some veterans are subject to being judged based on stereotypes. Some transitioning veterans suffer from serious mental and behavioral health issues brought on by trauma and approximately 15% have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, leading to stereotypes that veterans are randomly violent, rigid and unfit for civilian life. This leads to some veterans being shunned by employers based on stereotypes while others have difficulty accessing the mental health support that they need to navigate the workplace.

Recommendation: Leverage career pathways as a way to reframe the need to prioritize improvements to long-term behavioral health outcomes for military service members.

Tactics to explore include:

- Increase funding for public awareness initiatives that provide information to employers about the experiences of veterans and encourage support for effective behavioral health services for veterans in need.
- Provide employers with appropriate, trauma-informed training specific to language and behaviors.
- Increase employer awareness of transferable skills beyond one's military job to avoid bias from "type casting" that limits opportunity. While a Veteran may have had a certain role (e.g., tank driver), they also have leadership, communication and other skills that they can bring to a civilian role.
- Incentivize employers to develop employee resource groups that provide peer support.

Families with Young Children

The Families with Young Children working group first acknowledged that children are only one dimension of caregiving that impacts workforce engagement. There are also caregivers of parents and other family members. Specific to families with young children, the lack of safe, consistent and affordable child care and education, an inadequately paid child care workforce, and the lack of family-friendly workplace policies like paid leave and sick days are keeping caregivers – primarily women – out of the workforce.

There was a shared sentiment among the working group that there are still far too many decision makers who believe that caretaking challenges are a “women’s issue” or a household problem as opposed to a workforce issue or an economic development problem. Even with lowered post-pandemic labor force participation among women, there is still a belief by some that women should stay at home and raise their children themselves.³ There are also many NC households led by a single mother who, as the primary income earner, may lack child care and family-friendly policies that allow her to connect and engage in meaningful work.

There was also agreement that the current business model for child care services does not work, is in a crisis, and constitutes a market failure. Child care services are expensive, and child care centers struggle to stay open. The child care workforce does not make livable wages. The working group recommendations and tactics are meant to both address the immediate crisis and serve as precursors to creating system transformation.

³ Today, only 70 percent of households include two parents and only 3.4 percent of all North Carolina families—single-parent and two-parent—have a stay-at-home parent who cares for children full time.

Working group members discussed ways of reframing the problem as an economic development problem. Policy support for quality child care could be promoted as a business benefit to help employers retain employees while also giving them another leg up in the ongoing competition for talent. There were even suggestions of folding [Family Forward NC's family-friendly policies](#) into a “*good for jobs, good for families*” marketing campaign for North Carolina.

North Carolina is fortunate to have many state and local-level organizations dedicated to advancing child care quality and early learning outcomes, accessibility, and family-friendly workplace policies. Over time, they have developed deep expertise and strong collaboratives to address these foundational issues and they are making great strides. They are also deeply committed to equity and caution advocates to consider the unintended consequences of supporting child care access for some groups and not others, which would further widen the child care equity gap. The recommendations and tactics shared below focus on lifting up the existing work of these organizations as they relate to supporting work force participation. This working group prioritized the following interrelated challenges:

- Lack of access to high-quality, equitable, and affordable child care and lack of family-friendly workplace supports such as paid leave for working parents, especially those in low-wage jobs
- There is a shortage of child care educators and providers, with few entering the field, due to low wages and extensive responsibilities.

Challenge: Lack of access to high-quality, equitable, and affordable child care and lack of family-friendly workplace supports such as paid leave for working parents, especially those in low(er)-wage jobs

The working group discussion was primarily focused on child care services and workplace supports. Making child care and other family-friendly workplace supports part

of an economic development strategy for NC has been recognized as a top priority in the NC Department of Commerce strategic plan. Historically, economic development incentive programs have been linked to the number of jobs an employer provides. To meet the short-term needs of some families, pilot incentive programs that could encourage employers to identify areas where families need support in the workplace. Models to explore could include a family-friendly version of Job Development Incentive Grants (JDIG).

Access to child care and other family-friendly benefits can be a strategic advantage to recruit and retain employees. It is also important to note that family-friendly policies consist of more than access to quality child care services. Such policies also include benefits such as flexible hours, paid family and medical leave, and hybrid or remote working arrangements. Here again, it's important to acknowledge that filling the gap for some families (i.e., those who are already employed by high road employers already more likely to adopt voluntary policies) will leave behind those most in need of these supports, such as low(er) wage workers who are disproportionately workers of color.

Recommendation: Convene state-level stakeholders (e.g., NC Department of Commerce, Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina North Carolina, NC Association of Workforce Development Boards, NC Partnership for Children, NC Early Education Coalition, Division of Child Development and Early Education, NC Child, child care resource and referral agencies and existing related coalitions) to consider opportunities to position North Carolina as the “good jobs, good families” state, through investigating economic development programs that incentivize employers to support families in their workforce.

Tactics to explore include:

- Pilot economic development incentive programs for employers that provide family-friendly benefits such as paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, and flexible work while continually working toward an ultimate goal of long-term public policy changes that ensure programs are available to all workers, regardless of employer.
- Have state and local governments lead in the adoption of family-friendly policies, such as, but not limited to, paid parental leave for existing state employees.
- Ensure that materials regarding one's rights in the workplace are culturally appropriate, well-translated, and easy to find in Spanish and other dominant languages.
- Ensure that materials regarding how to apply for child care programs (e.g., PreK), subsidies and other resources, etc are culturally appropriate, well-translated and easy to find in Spanish and other dominant languages.

Recommendation: Leverage local partnerships to support administrative cost-sharing models for child care providers (e.g., bookkeeping, teacher training, the discounts on large supply orders, etc).

Tactics to explore:

- At the local level, assess the administrative needs of child care homes and centers to determine opportunities for shared services.

Recommendation: Leverage existing, underutilized, physical assets (ie: classrooms, prep kitchens, outdoor play areas, buildings, etc.) to support existing (and closed) child care programs and identify opportunities to open others. Public-private partnerships should be prioritized for investigation.

Tactics to explore include:

- Locally, leverage and engage faith-based communities, nonprofit, and community organizations in the delivery of child care and early childhood education services and leverage underutilized assets such as buildings that can be retro-fitted into child care centers and buses that are available most of the week.

There is a shortage of child care educators and providers, with few entering the field due to low wages and extensive responsibilities.

The child care industry experiences significant staff turnover and staffing shortages, principally because child care professionals are not adequately valued or compensated. They are generally not paid family-supporting wages nor are they provided benefits. Helpful resources to increase wages do exist such as (e.g., T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® NC Scholarship Program, Child Care WAGE\$, Infant-Toddler Educator AWARD\$® Plus) —but they are not available across all areas of the state, are not available to all child care workers, and don't always increase wages sufficiently.

Recommendation: Address salary and wage inequality for early childhood educators.

Tactics to explore include:

- Create more opportunities to lift up ongoing efforts to address inadequate compensation for the early childhood workforce (e.g., sample salary scale, raising the subsidy market rate, TEACH, WAGE\$, and AWARD\$ programs, etc.) with business and economic development supporters whose success relies upon the availability of a workforce who needs child care

- Research child care models in other states and locally in NC and test them as a precursor to creating a sustainable business model where the child care workforce is paid their worth and care is available and affordable to families in need across NC.
- Address regulations that are barriers to child care programs, especially for home child care providers.
- Allow state funding to be used to support licensure for home-based child care programs.

Recommendation: Build the pipeline of dual language early learning educators entering the field.

Tactics to explore include:

- Ensure that every county has English as a Second Language and/or Dual Language Learning resources.
- Partner with local Spanish-language media and other non-English media on stories about available child care and resources and to help promote these education programs.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that every one of these underrepresented groups are plagued by the assumptions, prejudices and misconceptions held by many of the people around them, including prospective employers. While providing members of these five groups with the support they need to successfully navigate labor markets and workplaces will be helpful, it would be difficult to arrive at practical, actionable recommendations to address long-standing biases and bigotry, including those held against people of different races, backgrounds, economic status, sexual orientation and genders. That fight remains ongoing.

It is also important to acknowledge the considerable overlap in identities and inter-related experiences among the groups. For example, nearly 1 in 5 (17.4%) of opportunity youth have a disability, and some opportunity youth may have had previous involvement with the criminal justice system or will in the future. It's also estimated that two-thirds of incarcerated individuals have a disability.⁴ Some members of each group also have families with young children, and some of these families are parenting a neurodivergent or disabled child. Individuals who overlap across these groups may also experience greater compounded trauma as a result of inhospitable systems and interpersonal biases.

Given the overlapping experiences of these various groups, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Task Force ultimately uncovered a larger, broader set of

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<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00495#:~:text=Overall%2C%20an%20estimated%2066%20percent%20of%20incarcerated%20people%20were%20disabled.>

cross-cutting recommendations centered around the need for **stronger workforce support ecosystems**. With active engagement and leadership from those with lived experience, and with stronger partnerships, processes and supports in place, these interconnected individuals and institutions can collectively ensure that people with lived experience are supported and can achieve workforce success. Employers who hire these diverse staff also benefit, such as from increased productivity and innovation.

Cross-Cutting recommendations include:

1. Make resources more accessible and relevant. This includes the active engagement of individuals with lived experience and an investment of time and resources to review, consolidate and continually update resources to ensure quality, ensure that more of the resources offered can be conveniently accessed, and create marketing plans to ensure that individuals and support providers are aware of them.
2. Create comprehensive career pathways that meet the needs of businesses, can be tailored to meet the needs of different underrepresented groups, are trauma-informed, and include mental health resources and supports as critical components. Introduce these career pathways as early as possible (e.g., youth and young adults).
3. Invest in the workforce behind the workforce. This includes child care workers, teachers, healthcare workers including behavioral health

providers, transportation providers and others who make it possible for other workers to work. Additionally, it was identified that underrepresented individuals need help navigating the workforce system and the relationships within it. Community navigators (e.g., community health workers, job coaches, etc.). need to be trained, credentialed and properly compensated.

4. Create new funding models that make it easier for service providers to meet the unique needs of underrepresented populations. This includes more flexibility (i.e., tailoring approaches, length of time to demonstrate outcomes), make it easier for service providers to receive and account for funds (i.e., braiding different streams of funding before it gets to the service provider), and building the financial and organizational capacity of “boots on the ground” service providers that have the trust of the community.
5. Create opportunities for peer-peer learning among employers, workforce developers, and service providers to share successes, problem-solve concerns, reduce overall biases, hold each other accountable and ensure greater economies of scale. Enhance integration of statewide services deployed locally so they are consistent in quality, scope and accountability.

6. Co-locate trusted service providers with workforce services to more effectively influence the support provided to meet the needs of underrepresented individuals. Proximity and convenience are important traits in a successful ecosystem.

More importantly, individuals across all of these groups have the capacity to be great employees, entrepreneurs, business owners and civic leaders, contributing to the economic and social fabric of our state. Addressing the unique needs of these individuals is important, but there is also great potential in considering their collective needs as members of a total workforce solution.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A

Task Force Members

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