

# IMMIGRANT PRIORITIES FOR WIA REAUTHORIZATION

## NATIONAL IMMIGRATION LAW CENTER

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The reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) offers an opportunity to build on the successes of the program and to address some of the weaknesses of the workforce development and adult education system. Federal law should ensure that persons who are limited English-proficient (LEP) are employable, by providing necessary skills training and English language instruction. To achieve this goal, the WIA program should make training services more accessible, allow for flexible performance measures, and support English language instruction that meets the needs of LEP participants.

Immigrant families account for 20 percent of all low-wage working families with children. Unfortunately, current workforce development policies and programs have been ineffective in serving immigrants and persons who are LEP. Most job seekers have been prevented from participating in training programs under WIA because of “work-first” policies. For immigrants, this lack of access to training is significant. Immigrants who are fluent in oral and written English earn approximately 24 percent more than those who lack fluency, regardless of their qualifications. Even when immigrants are given the opportunity to enroll in training programs, there is an insufficient number of programs that can meet their training needs.

The U.S. Department of Labor projects that some industries with a high percentage of immigrant workers, such as garment and other manufacturing, will experience job losses in this decade. This decline will force workers to find employment in other industries, increasing the need for language and skills training, job placement, and supportive services.

### **1. Allow for flexibility in the delivery of one-stop services:**

- ◆ More than 40 percent of noncitizens have less than a high school education, and approximately 17.8 million adults in the U.S. are LEP. Given their low levels of education and English proficiency, immigrants need basic skills training to succeed in the U.S. workforce.
- ◆ WIA services are divided into three tiers: “core,” “intensive,” and “training.” Although WIA does not mandate any minimum length of time that an individual must spend in core or intensive services before he or she can obtain training services, many one-stops have presented training as a “last resort” for their clients. This approach has limited access to training services. Further, because language instruction (where it has been available) is accessible only through the training module, immigrants have not had the opportunity to improve their English proficiency and occupational skills.
- ◆ One-stop centers should be able to enroll job seekers in core, intensive, *or* training services, depending on the particular needs of the individual.

### **2. Allow for flexibility in the performance accountability system:**

- ◆ The current performance system creates a disincentive to serve persons who are LEP because they generally need more intensive training than native-born individuals.
- ◆ In order to meet performance measures, many one-stops “cream” the best individuals (i.e., the individuals most likely to get a job) for training services, and offer persons with greater barriers to employment the more limited “core” services.
- ◆ Training providers should be given flexibility in meeting their performance measures when serving clients who face barriers to employment, such as limited English proficiency.

### **3. Include LEP persons in populations that are targeted for special projects:**

- ◆ Programs that target LEP persons currently are not designated as projects eligible to receive funding under demonstration projects, research grants, or state discretionary funding.

- ◆ Including programs that target LEP persons in activities that may be funded with special project funds gives states more flexibility to develop innovative programs for LEP persons.
4. **Amend the Adult Basic Education (ABE) funding formula to include LEP persons:**
    - ◆ Under current law, LEP persons are not considered in the distribution of ABE funds—even though they are enrolled in ABE programs, such as English as a Second Language (ESL).
    - ◆ The funding formula should be amended to ensure that states with large numbers of LEP persons (e.g., California and Texas) or with high growth rates of LEP persons (e.g., Georgia and Nebraska) receive funding for a population that is enrolled in ABE programs.
  5. **Provide better access for community-based organizations (CBOs) to receive Adult Basic Education and workforce development funding:**
    - ◆ In many states, there is a growing need for community-based instruction that is accessible and responsive to LEP persons. However, ABE and workforce development funding is typically not available to these CBOs.
    - ◆ Immigrants are more likely to seek services from CBOs that have cultural and linguistic competence and are situated where immigrants live and work. Many CBOs already provide job training, ESL, and other adult literacy instruction; however, such programs usually are funded by sources outside of the workforce system.
  6. **Create incentives for programs that integrate occupational training and language acquisition:**
    - ◆ Existing programs that integrate skills training and language acquisition have demonstrated remarkable employment outcomes.
    - ◆ These programs are rarely funded under WIA because of the stringent performance measures mandated by the statute or the inability of providers to use a combination of Title I and Title II funding.
    - ◆ Providing incentives, such as unified performance measures or eliminating employer contributions to training programs, will encourage the adoption of innovative models for providing services to LEP persons.
  7. **Require data collection on 16-18-year-old students:**
    - ◆ Educators and advocates are concerned that 16, 17, and 18-year-olds have been pushed into adult ESL programs, due to the increased demands on high schools to meet the student performance requirements under the “No Child Left Behind Act” and various state laws.
    - ◆ In order to assess whether these concerns are justified and, if so, what impact this trend may have on 16-18-year-old students, WIA should be amended to require certain data collection and reporting to the Department of Education and to Congress.

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