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DISMANTLING DISPARITY: BREAKING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT



A brief by Center for the Advancement of Racial Equity (CARE) At Work at the UCLA Labor Center

ABOUT US

Center for the Advancement of Racial Equity (CARE) at Work is an initiative of the UCLA Labor Center. The goal of the center is to bring Black workers, university and advocates together to multiply racial equity by creating approaches and advancing innovative solutions that address the needs of Black working class people. CARE at Work is a model for any institution that is committed to advancing civic engagement and realizing a community where the equity created around Black life cascades into meaningful Black working conditions.

The UCLA Labor Center believes that a public university belongs to the people and should advance quality education and employment for all. Every day we bring together workers, students, faculty and policymakers to address the most critical issues facing working people today. Our research, education and policy work lifts industry standards, creates jobs that are good for communities, and strengthens immigrant rights, especially for students and youth.

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INTRODUCTION

Many different populations experience challenges of barriers to employment attainment and retention. These challenges are exacerbated when individuals belong to groups that have been historically relegated to low-wage labor, a type of employment that is plagued with minimal career advancement and offers little promise of economic security for workers. These issues are systemic and create overlapping barriers. Workforce preparation, training and education programs are helpful ways to reduce barriers to employment, particularly for individuals who belong to these groups. Substantial and meaningful employment can be attained for many of these individuals through workforce and education programs build more self-sufficient communities and local economies. Vulnerable target populations include displaced workers, low wage laborers, migrant workers, formerly incarcerated, armed services veterans, persons with disabilities, persons for whom English is their second language, and many others. Many individuals who can be identified by these groups also belong to multiple marginalized groups based on race, ethnicity and even geographic identity, which further compounds their challenges of securing substantial employment. Amendments to the Breaking Barriers to Employment Act, like those currently suggested in AB 628 and other proposed legislation, would expand resources to reach Black workers who have been economically devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

Black workers occupy a specific demographic that has been historically disadvantaged through systemic discrimination that has affected their social, economic and civil freedoms. Barriers to education, adequate housing, food security, and substantial employment are all consequences of a U.S. society intent on weaving racial prejudice into the fabric of our nation and economy. A deep tradition of formalized and de facto forms of discrimination have relegated many Black workers to experience severe economic, social and political disadvantages that have been worsened by the effects of the pandemic. It is crucial that comprehensive, holistic programs are implemented to address the complexity of unique barriers. Workforce development initiatives have an opportunity in this peculiar economic landscape to seize state and national investments in infrastructure and public industry to not only remedy the long-standing historic disadvantages that many vulnerable groups face, but to transform the economic realities of millions. To establish an economic opportunity for those who have been disenfranchised will require profound and long-term investments from stakeholders at all levels of community, legislature and government. Amendments to the Breaking Barriers to Employment Act begin to provide a solution by allowing CBOs and worker centers to independently apply for grant funds, but can be improved by adding specific considerations for Black workers and others who are disadvantaged and deeply affected by the pandemic. These amendments include adapting language in future legislation that explicitly names statewide goals of racial equity; targeting those communities that experience overlapping barriers; implementing changes to the composition of advisory structures so that they reflect community priorities; and prioritizing the continued engagement and participation of CBOs and strategic public-private partnerships. This brief will describe how amendments to AB 1111 can help dismantle disparity and break barriers to employment.



AB 1111 SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND

The Breaking Barriers to Employment Act enacted the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative in October 2018. The Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative, an initiative administered by the California Workforce Development Board (CWDB), created a grant program that aids in the development of training and educational services for individuals with barriers to employment so they may participate in local labor markets. The purpose of these grant-funded programs is to ensure that individuals are equipped with the skills training and educational services that will reduce barriers to employment, allowing them to successfully enter the labor market, retain employment in high-road careers, and work toward economic security.ⁱⁱ This effort was executed through partnerships with the CWDB, CBOs, local workforce development boards, and in alignment with regional labor sectors. Rather than duplicating existing programs or creating new

THE PURPOSE OF THESE GRANT-FUNDED PROGRAMS IS TO ENSURE THAT INDIVIDUALS ARE EQUIPPED WITH THE SKILLS TRAINING AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES THAT WILL REDUCE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT.

workforce and education programs, the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative aimed to provide supplemental funding and support to ensure the success of those individuals who are preparing to enter or are currently participating in workforce and education programs.

In order to qualify grant funding, community organizations must form a partnership with a local workforce development board and a mission-driven

CBO with a history of providing services to the target population(s) specified. Examples of these types of grant-funded programs include adult education, mentoring, high school diploma and GED acquisition, earn and learn training, stipends for trainees, industry certifications, and other eligible activities. The CWDB is required to submit an interim and final report to the Legislature, evaluating the efficacy and reach of this initiative. The initial partnership requirement included in the original administration proved to be a cumbersome obligation, based on feedback from community partners. Local workforce development boards were overwhelmed with the high number of community organizations that sought partnerships in order to apply for grant funds. In addition, an overwhelming rate of all grant funds appropriated under AB 1111 were exhausted by an unexpectedly high rate of administrative overhead costs on behalf of the CWDB. Moving forward, it is of the utmost importance that AB 628 prioritizes those communities that have been historically disenfranchised and excluded from government-sourced funding streams. These funding streams are crucial in providing those organizations based in marginalized communities with the necessary resources needed to best support workers who hail from regions where opportunities are scarce. In an ongoing effort to provide aid for the continued development of workforce education and training services, amendments are required to best serve these vulnerable populations.



2020'S IMPACT

The events of 2020 make initiatives like Breaking Barriers to Employment even more crucial. COVID-19 has spurred the start of a national economic downturn, which is particularly dangerous for those workers who are employed in the public sector and low-wage labor. In California, more than one third of Black workers are low-wage workers.¹ Previous economic downturns reveal that it is crucial to provide support to those who are economically vulnerable and hardest hit; otherwise, their recovery will lag behind the country's overall recovery rate. The state government and local organizations, including workforce development boards and labor organizations, will need to take careful steps to address the overlapping barriers that Black workers face from the added impact of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has relegated all workers to three groups: those who find themselves unemployed; those who are deemed essential workers and must risk their lives to work; and those who are privileged to work in the safety of their homes. Unfortunately, Black workers are more likely to be a part of the first two groups. As a racial group representing 13.4% of the total U.S. population, Black people are continually experiencing disproportionate rates of unemployment, with almost 18% of Black workers losing their jobs between February and April of 2020.ⁱⁱⁱ Those who are still employed are more likely to be part of the frontline workforce required to risk their safety and the health of their families to keep the economy running, representing 17% of all essential workers. In February 2021, one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate for Black workers in California was the highest for any group at 13.5%, while the overall California unemployment rate was 10.6%, despite Black people representing 6% of the state's population.^{iv v} When looking at 2020 as a whole the picture gets even bleaker, from March to December of 2020, 84% of the Black labor force in California have filed for unemployment.^{vi} Given this devastating reality, opportunities to get resources on the ground to Black workers should be prioritized as we continue to deal with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a dilemma that has worsened the already looming issues of unemployment and economic insecurity that Black workers face.

WHEN LOOKING AT 2020 AS A WHOLE THE PICTURE GETS EVEN BLEAKER, FROM MARCH TO DECEMBER OF 2020, 84% OF THE BLACK LABOR FORCE IN CALIFORNIA HAVE FILED FOR UNEMPLOYMENT.

Last year not only brought about economic turmoil and record-breaking unemployment in the Black community, but also exposed the reckoning of the United States' racist past and present treatment of Black people. Racial tensions in the U.S. reached a fever pitch following the brutal

¹ In part, this is due to the fact that Black workers are employed at the highest rate among other races when considering employment in the public sector.

murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, two Black people whose highly publicized death at the hands of police sparked national protests intensified by the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. Since then, U.S. corporations have pledged \$50 billion toward racial equity investments that promised to diversify workforces, promote more Black workers internally, and devote more shelf space to Black businesses, among other things.^{vii} Now, more than a year later, only \$250 million has been devoted to these causes. Though these initiatives may be well-meaning, they do little to create lasting bridges of opportunity for Black workers in California and Black workers nationally. Corporations and state governments must align their racial equity visions with explicit investments that target the specific and particular barriers that Black workers experience.

The Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative presents an urgent opportunity to take careful steps that can speak to both the economic recovery of those hardest hit economically by COVID-19, and begin to meet a longtime need for racial equity. Those with barriers to employment should be supported with the necessary workforce and education programs that can secure and retain employment, leading to self-sufficiency and economic security. This is even more important today as we still reel from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BREAKING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT TODAY

Increased funding to the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative would allow the continued growth and success of training and educational services of CBOs and worker centers. If this increased funding reaches CBOs, its impact will be even stronger. Organizations like the Los Angeles Black Worker Center maintain strong connections with Black workers facing barriers to employment. These relationships and understanding of Black worker challenges help to ensure efficient and impactful programming for Black workers. It is crucial that grassroots racial equity organizations work intimately with workers of color are adequately supported in state-funded initiatives that aim to relieve economic insecurity.

Through this initiative, those with barriers to employment are to be supported with the necessary workforce and education programs that can secure and retain employment, leading to self-sufficiency and economic security. For Black workers, this is just one of many state-sanctioned initiatives necessary to mitigate decades of economic disadvantages.

It is imperative that the state and federal funding that is allocated to encourage workforce development prioritizes the overlapping barriers that many Black workers face. Though the Black population in the United States is relatively small when compared with the entire population, Black people are overrepresented in incarcerated and homeless populations. In addition, systemic racism puts Black people at risk for a number of health and educational disparities, which work to further alienate an already struggling working class.^{viii} All of these factors create barriers to employment that are difficult to overcome independently and without strategic support. These racialized barriers to employment have been challenging to address as limitations mandating race neutrality in legislation. For example, in 1996, California Proposition 209 prevented the adoption of AB 628, or any other legislation or initiative for that matter, from intentionally addressing Black disparities. AB 628 and other future workforce initiatives can ensure that racial equity remain a priority by mandating strategies that target opportunity zones, which strike at the core of intersecting communities in need on behalf of Black people, immigrants and others who live in poverty.

Due to the issues outlined in the previous section, the following amendments to AB 628 of note are being considered by the State Legislature.

“BLACK PEOPLE ARE OVERREPRESENTED IN INCARCERATED AND HOMELESS POPULATIONS, AND ARE AT RISK FOR A NUMBER OF HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES, WHICH WORK TO FURTHER ALIENATE AN ALREADY STRUGGLING WORKING CLASS. ALL OF THESE FACTORS CREATE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO OVERCOME INDEPENDENTLY AND WITHOUT STRATEGIC SUPPORT.”

- Remove the application requirement that previously mandated CBOs to partner with local workforce development boards in applying for grants available through the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative. In the previous application cycle, local workforce development boards were overwhelmed by the requirement of partnership. Moving forward, this amendment will relieve the massive task of partnering with all CBO applicants. This amendment will allow for CBOs and other local entities to apply for grants directly and independently.
- Restrict spending associated with overhead costs of the California Workforce Development Board, or any other state operations related to grant administration, to a fixed percentage of the budget appropriation total, as determined by a subcommittee appointed by the chair of the board, which will allocate funds for necessary administrative and miscellaneous costs of application reviewal and program management. Remaining funds will be awarded to grantees devoted to the ongoing development of the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative.
- To adequately support the increasing demands of an ever-changing workforce while properly funding workforce training and education efforts, the budget appropriation request has been increased to \$15 million to be allocated in the upcoming Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative application cycle. This increase will certainly help more workers, but is not nearly enough to adequately reach all workers in desperate need of support, especially during the pandemic.
- The development of an equitable and representative subcommittee (previously referred to as an advisory board) of the California Workforce Development Board, with the primary responsibility of building community awareness to grant funds and ensuring that vulnerable communities are best served under this initiative. This subcommittee will be represented by members of the CWDB, CBO representatives, High Road Training Partnerships and/or High Road Construction Careers.

**THE CONTINUED SUCCESS OF THE
BREAKING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT
INITIATIVE RELIES ON FUNDS
BECOMING AVAILABLE FOR CBOs AND
WORKER CENTERS.**

The continued success of the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative relies on funds becoming available for CBOs and worker centers. These organizations have intimate and profound connections with the community and are the best equipped to address issues that workers face. In providing opportunities for workforce training and educational services, local organizations can effectively direct resources that are pertinent and specific to regional needs. Moving forward, the introduction of AB 628 presents an opportunity to better serve organizations that may have been previously excluded from local,

state and federal funding sources. One amendment of AB 628 abandons former requirements mandating that CBOs partner with local workforce development boards in order to apply for the grant program. The annulment of this requirement will relieve the strain on local workforce development boards allowing CBOs to apply independently. It will also serve as an opportunity for local organizations to tailor specific programming that best address the unique needs of the populations and communities that they set out to serve.



IN CONCLUSION

The amendments that have been proposed to the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative are only some of the necessary measures that can be taken to best address the longstanding issues of inequity and inaccessibility that many Californians face as they attempt to enter into and achieve substantial employment alongside millions of fellow workers. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its ensuing effects of economic volatility and downturn, future policies that aim to serve vulnerable and marginalized workers will need to prioritize Black workers and others who are not only most impacted by the economic volatility of the present moment, but also most impacted by systems of economic and racial inequity. Policies that are designed to serve the workforce must emulate the progress that we hope to see in our communities, including measurable goals of racial equity and economic prosperity. The following recommendations can be considered to target highly impacted workers, Black workers and others:

- **Adapt draft language that prioritizes and explicitly expresses goals of racial equity.** Equity principles: Putting people first: Explicitly address racial discrimination and inequity; Focus on place (concentrated poverty, neighborhoods that have suffered from lack of investment); Shared prosperity (investing in community, not corporations).
- **Include a requirement that specifies that a certain portion or percentage of funding be allocated to those zip codes** within the state that are most impacted by the compounding systemic consequences of poverty and high rates of unemployment, as evidenced by a record high 98% unemployment rate in Black communities at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. By empowering organizations serving these communities, this will ensure that funding is used to target those areas that are currently experiencing the greatest need for gateways to economic opportunity.
- **Target opportunity zones.** Census tracts, as identified by the IRS to be economically distressed areas, named ‘opportunity zones’, represent an opportunity to target specific communities that are in dire need of community-based investments. In California, 879 opportunity zones have been acknowledged and identified by Governor Newsom. By targeting AB 628 funds into opportunity zones, it can ensure that state resources are impacting the most vulnerable populations with overlapping barriers to employment. About 49% (439) of these opportunity zones in California have a Black population of more than 5.8% (the California state average).
- **Prioritizing the participation of local organizations.** By removing requirements that mandate CBOs to partner with local workforce development boards, local organizations are empowered to enact positive change in their respective communities with agency and invaluable experiential insights of the people and communities they serve. Prioritizing the participation of local organizations also provides an opportunity to create and further

support partnerships between CBOs, workforce development boards, worker centers, unions, and other regional labor stakeholders. Regional partnerships between labor organizations and CBOs work to ensure that workers' voices are heard and that access to quality jobs remains paramount. Networks founded by organizations like the Los Angeles Black Workers Center are a testament to how existing local partnerships with other CBOs are foundational in not only forming an intimate understanding of the plight of Black workers, but also instrumental in implementing sustainable training and educational resources that will aid Black workers in attaining and retaining substantial employment.

Against the backdrop of an economic reality devastated by the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, policies like AB 628 represent an opportunity to make the necessary changes in reimagining the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative. In order to reach the many vulnerable Californians in need, there is much work to do to ensure that these invaluable and timely resources are administered with equity in mind. Black Worker Centers in Los Angeles, the Inland Empire and San Diego are all in the process of meeting these workforce needs of Black workers by focusing on public sector, water district, and construction job training and access.² There must be a recognition of the overlapping and systemic mechanisms of racial inequity and poverty that afflict so many in our communities. Black workers exist at the intersection of economic, social and political marginalization, and they must be prioritized now and in the future. The already difficult and demanding working conditions of low-wage workers have been severely compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, in ways that are inhumane and unsustainable, and must be rectified. The continuation of initiatives like Breaking Barriers to Employment present an equity-centered and opportunity-conscious path forward that is key to a California workforce that is productive, healthy and on the road to a brighter future – together.



² Los Angeles Black Worker Center currently is working on a Workforce Equity Demonstration project under the High Road Training Partnership initiative in collaboration with WERC, City of Los Angeles Department of Public Works (DPW), City of Los Angeles Workforce Development Board, SEIU Local 721, AFSCME District Council 36, and other members of the 1000 Strong Coalition including the County Federation of Labor (LA Fed).

The Inland Empire Black Worker Center is collaborating with IE Works and other partners to develop a community based pre-apprenticeship program that would feed into the apprenticeship program for the local water districts.

The San Diego Black Worker Center is working to understand the job access for Black residential construction workers on affordable housing projects in San Diego.

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

This brief is based on our analysis of AB 1111, AB 628 and a comprehensive literature review. We also held meetings and interviews with PolicyLink staff and Los Angeles Black Worker Center staff.

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