



Amplifying the Impact: Bridging the Gap for New Americans

In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) released the Bridging the Gap for New Americans final report, a product of bipartisan legislation passed in 2022. This first-of-its-kind federal study 1) explores the barriers and opportunities facing internationally educated immigrants and refugees in reconnecting with careers in the U.S.; 2) reviews the existing policy and program models that aim to serve this population; and 3) provides guidance for how local, state, and federal stakeholders can strengthen the inclusion of these workers in an economy increasingly in need of their skills and experience.

World Education Services (WES) worked alongside partners in Congress, advocates, government actors, and the nonprofit community to pass the legislation and support DOL in its execution. This brief presents a synopsis of the study's findings and WES's response, including an expanded set of policy recommendations **focusing on actions that can be taken at the federal level through both legislation and the actions of executive branch agencies**. It provides a roadmap to help stakeholders seeking to foster the full inclusion and economic impact of internationally trained immigrants and refugees in the U.S. workforce. Such efforts to harness New American talent will propel economies at the local, state, and national level, helping to address workforce shortages in vital industries such as health care and advance our collective good. Implementation of these recommendations will also have individual- and community-level effects, transforming New Americans' ability to rejoin their careers and build a sense of belonging in the U.S. while also mitigating the impact of workforce shortages on business owners and consumers.

This brief responds to the Department of Labor's "Bridging the Gap for New Americans" report. It includes policy recommendations, focusing on actions that can be taken at the federal level through both legislation and the actions of executive branch agencies, to foster the full inclusion and economic impact of internationally trained immigrants and refugees in the U.S. workforce.



Key Report Highlights

Barriers to Employment

DOL's Bridging the Gap for New Americans final report (hereafter referred to as "the report" or "BTG") points to 2021 estimates by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) indicating that approximately 52 percent of individuals participating in our labor force and born outside the U.S. hold at least a bachelor's degree from another country.¹ Yet, according to MPI and BTG itself, New Americans who hold credentials earned outside the U.S. face significant obstacles in securing employment aligned with their education and professional backgrounds, with a full 24 percent either underemployed (working in jobs that require lower levels of education or work experience) or unemployed. The mismatch between an immigrant's prior education and occupation and their current employment is often highest in fields such as law or medicine—in other words, professions which require formal credential recognition and occupational licensing and/or professions which strongly depend on professional and career-aligned English proficiency.

The DOL report identifies several critical obstacles to career advancement that researchers and immigrant advocates have long recognized. These include:

- **Credential recognition:** Academic credentials and professional experience gained outside the U.S. are often undervalued or not readily accepted in the U.S. job market or by higher education institutions. Internationally trained immigrants with only a bachelor's degree face far higher levels of underemployment and skills mismatch than those with a graduate or professional degree, but both groups lack streamlined entry into skills-aligned employment. The absence of national standards or oversight of the credential evaluation process means that internationally educated immigrants must navigate a confusing web of service providers with widely different requirements, pricing, and levels of acceptance by professional bodies, state licensing boards, and academic institutions.
- **Occupational licensing requirements:** The process of obtaining necessary professional licenses or certifications can be time-consuming, costly, and complex to navigate. Barriers include diminished license portability or recognition across states and countries; overly burdensome English proficiency testing; differing requirements by

¹ Batalova, J., & Fix, M. (2021). Leaving money on the table: The persistence of brain waste among college-educated immigrants. Migration Policy Institute.



state and by occupation; limited awareness of the opportunity or process on the part of licensing boards; and lack of dedicated services and financial support to assist with the licensing process.

- **Language proficiency:** Limited English proficiency and/or career-aligned English writing and speaking skills can seriously impede access to job opportunities, particularly in occupations requiring strong communication skills and proficiency in career-specific language and communication style.
- **Limited access to workforce training opportunities:** Internationally trained immigrants and refugees often face a range of barriers to accessing publicly funded vocational training or skill-building programs for which they are eligible. Some barriers are similar to those that exist for U.S.-born individuals, such as limited options for childcare or transportation. However, these challenges are amplified for New Americans by issues such as unfamiliarity with U.S. systems and the fact that, in general, workforce systems are not well-equipped to serve New Americans. Many workforce practitioners have little to no training in how best to support immigrants and English language learners (ELLs) or how to transfer their skills into the U.S. job market. In addition, legacy and existing workforce programs often focus on entry-level occupations rather than pathways into licensed professions and occupations requiring higher education, reducing their relevance for internationally trained New Americans (and their U.S.-born peers).
- **Social and cultural challenges:** Internationally educated immigrants and refugees may also encounter social and cultural obstacles when trying to integrate into the U.S. labor market. These include employer discrimination and bias related to perceived immigration status, accented English, cultural background, and unfamiliarity with educational systems or occupational standards outside the U.S.
- **Financial barriers:** Unemployed and underemployed immigrant professionals face a range of financial and systemic barriers to full participation in workforce programming and to navigating educational and professional pathways. These include rising costs of living; costs associated with education, testing, credential evaluation, and licensing; and the opportunity cost of sacrificing income-generating employment to participate in unpaid (and sometimes costly) workforce training.



Data Limitations

Alongside these barriers to employment, the DOL report also highlights the limitations of existing survey and program data related to workforce integration for internationally trained immigrants and refugees. The need for robust and reliable data presents a barrier, both for researchers who seek to understand the needs and challenges of these workers and for policymakers seeking to understand—and improve upon—the impact of existing policy and practices that support economic inclusion.

Challenges include:

- **Lack of robust data at scale:** Sources of nationally representative data such as the American Community Survey (ACS) often miss detailed information on the place of origin of immigrants' academic credentials and of their international work experience or professional licensure. This makes it difficult to assess the specific needs and challenges that immigrant and refugee workers face when trying to rejoin their careers in the U.S. At state and local levels, workforce data systems similarly do not track much information relevant to New Americans' distinct training needs and career trajectories, leading to underrepresentation or misrepresentation of this population in workforce statistics.
- **Fragmented and siloed data:** Data that is collected about immigrants' and refugees' international experience and training and/or their jobs post-arrival in the U.S. exist in federal grant reports or in discrete systems that are not purpose-built to understand New Americans' employment trajectories over time. Program and grant-funded datasets routinely provide information related to the operation or success of a particular program or toward grantee (or funder)-identified goals, but they do not provide longitudinal data to understand an individual's employment trajectory, during or after the grant period. Likewise, some government systems do have viable and robust data, but due to issues such as interoperability across government systems, limited knowledge across departments, or lack of available and strong privacy controls or permissions, this data is often siloed and difficult to use to identify broader trends and longitudinal employment outcomes. In addition, immigration data, such as that collected through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, resides at the federal level, while workforce data, including wage and employment data available through unemployment insurance platforms, is collected by states.
- **Community trust:** While not in the DOL report per se, a mistrust of government is common among many New American communities, stemming from experiences prior to and after arriving in the U.S. This mistrust leads to low participation or misrepresentation in data collection efforts, including in the census or workforce-specific collection efforts.



Promising Programs and Evidence-Based Interventions

As part of the study, DOL researchers conducted a review of existing research and a landscape scan of 80 programs and services aimed at addressing the employment challenges facing internationally trained immigrants and refugees.² They identified several programmatic models and policy strategies that states, local governments, higher education institutions, and non-profit organizations have instituted to support workforce integration and career advancement for this population. These include:

- **State policy initiatives:** Many states have amended laws to reduce barriers to entry into regulated occupations, with a particular focus on health care professions (for example, international medical graduates). Over 20 states host or will soon host a statewide Office of New Americans or a similar initiative focused on immigrant and refugee integration, many of which have an economic development or workforce focus.
- **Career coaching programs:** The DOL report highlighted successful local, state, and national programs that provide career support to internationally trained immigrants and refugees. These models provide one-on-one coaching, English language training, workforce readiness training, and networking and job placement assistance. Examples include the non-profit Welcome Back Center of Suburban Maryland, which assists underemployed immigrant health professionals; the Portland Adult Education program's New Mainers Resource Center, which provides programmatic support, research, and policy advocacy to advance the workforce integration of internationally trained immigrants and refugees in Maine; and statewide initiatives in New York and Virginia that offer individualized and industry-specific job coaching through community-based partners and workforce centers.
- **Community colleges:** The report included promising practices that community colleges and some four-year state colleges have put in place to assist internationally trained immigrants and refugees. These include credential evaluation and career advising and navigation services. Also highlighted are English language bridge programs that facilitate immigrant students' entry or re-entry into occupations and roles that are commensurate with their education and professional experience. Examples in the report include Miami Dade College's Foreign-Trained Professionals Program and SUNY Westchester Community College's Professional Development Center.

² See the "Catalog of Employment and Training Programs Serving New Americans" on the webpage for the Bridging the Gap for New Americans Study, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Bridging-the-Gap-for-New-Americans>.



The report also notes key policy recommendations that community-based groups, workforce organizations, and state-level initiatives have advanced to strengthen employment and career opportunities for immigrants and refugees who hold credentials from another country. These include expanding the availability of advanced and career-aligned English instruction to increase workplace communication skills; utilizing bridge programming and apprenticeships to build needed skills and gain work experience; and providing targeted career navigation support and occupation-specific training resources.

WES Policy Response and Recommendations

Taken overall, BTG's findings confirm at the federal level what many practitioners and state policymakers have long understood. The study fuels the sense of urgency behind the system-wide asks of WES and its partners—including statewide Offices of New Americans, community colleges, leading economic researchers, and community-based non-profit organizations. Federal recognition of such challenges and possibilities is vital to our work as a nation to build a healthy economy and to future-proof our workforce from demographic and other changes.

The federal government can now take advantage of the opportunity and catalyze more focused efforts to tap into the skills and work experience of New Americans. To maximize the impact of promising programs and continue to build a workforce where everyone can thrive, WES proposes a five-point policy strategy for federal government actors, policymakers, employers, and immigrant and refugee advocates:

1. Reduce Barriers to Professional Licensing and Recognition of Credentials Earned Outside the U.S.

Challenges tied to navigating the professional licensing process and to gaining recognition for international educational and professional credentials are among the most pervasive and stubborn barriers facing internationally educated immigrants. These barriers also negatively impact under-resourced industries, such as health care and education, that rely on regulated occupations. While the onus to reform occupational licensure is on states, the federal government can play a vital role:

- The federal government should convene stakeholders to discuss barriers and opportunities regarding international education and credential recognition by employers, colleges and universities, and occupational licensing bodies. Such stakeholders may include states, licensing bodies, state and national professional associations, employers, higher education institutions, credential evaluation agencies, immigrant-serving community-based groups, and internationally trained professionals themselves. The federal government should use its convening power to accelerate solutions, as such advancements have the potential to positively impact the national economy.



- Such conversations should focus on facilitating processes for internationally trained professionals to join the workforce in high-demand occupations or occupations anticipated to be necessary for national safety and well-being (for example, engineers to work on infrastructure modernization). Approaches include reducing financial barriers, accepting credential evaluations from a broader selection of services, and expanding efforts around license portability across state lines and national borders. Stakeholders should also explore program and policy options (such as the WES Gateway Program)³ for evaluating the credentials of refugees and other displaced individuals who face obstacles to accessing their academic records, both before and after their arrival in the U.S.
- Additionally, the federal government could direct a portion of existing grant-funded efforts (for instance, during the ongoing implementation of 2021's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act) to programs helping internationally trained New Americans transition their skills as part of overall efforts to develop the workforce necessary to implement federal legislation.

2. Build an Inclusive Workforce System

DOL oversees our federal workforce system, including American Job Centers (or workforce centers) and programs, such as through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I (workforce development) funds. This system can and should better serve all U.S. residents, including eligible internationally trained immigrants and refugees. Much can be done to increase the ability of the workforce system to train and place internationally trained New Americans in careers aligned with their skills and credentials, and federal efforts should focus on improving its services for immigrant and refugee populations.

The need is apparent: immigrants and refugees make up 20 percent of the U.S. labor force, yet they are underrepresented in workforce services and programs, despite meeting priority population definitions under WIOA Title I.⁴ In California, for example, immigrants make up 32 percent of the workforce,⁵ yet English language learners (ELLs), many of whom are New Americans, in recent years made up only 3.7 percent of those leaving Title I programs.⁶ WIOA Title II is the main source of federal support for state adult education and ELL programs. Yet

³ <https://www.wes.org/partners/global-talent-bridge/about-the-wes-gateway-program>

⁴ Priority populations include English language learners and those who need skills development. The majority of immigrants and refugees meet one if not both of these priority requirements.

⁵ <https://map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/california/#::-:text=California%20has%20long%20been%20home.state's%20economy%20in%20many%20ways>

⁶ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/WIOAFactSheet-California-FINAL.pdf>



MPI finds that state adult education programs funded through Title II historically serve less than 4 percent of adult ELLs in the country.⁷

Additionally, our current workforce system prioritizes entry-level job placement over skill matching and long-term career development. Internationally trained immigrants are often wrongly tracked into lower-level community college programs, non-credit coursework, or even high school equivalency programs. As a result, many end up working in occupations that are not commensurate with their education and experience and that limit upward mobility.

New Americans are also underrepresented in other workforce programs, such as in the growing field of apprenticeships. As the report points out, apprenticeships and other “earn and learn” models offer an increasingly important road to promoting economic mobility and addressing workforce shortages. Federal apprenticeship dollars now support state apprenticeship programs in fields ranging from the skilled trades to IT occupations to licensed professions such as teaching and nursing.⁸ At the same time, the shortage of contextualized English programs in apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeship training severely limits the access of immigrants and other ELLs to these opportunities.⁹

To respond to these gaps, non-profits have developed programs such as those described in BTG. These are smaller, local efforts supported by private grant funding or one-time non-federal funds. Some states, including New York¹⁰ and Minnesota,¹¹ use state grants to fund partnerships with community-based groups to provide services for internationally trained professionals. However, there is a need for federal funds, funding incentives, and policy guidance to encourage expansion to other states. The result is that the programs outlined in the report, individually or collectively, have limited ability to operate at scale to serve the one in five workers in the U.S. who are New Americans.

To address these system-wide obstacles, WES recommends the following:

- DOL should develop and promote policies that increase the number of New Americans served through WIOA Title I programs, including immigrants and refugees who earned credentials in another country, and develop approaches that address barriers to workforce services faced by English language learners. Following the model of American Job Centers in states like Virginia,¹² DOL should encourage states to develop incentives to increase the numbers of New Americans served in their WIOA state plans,

⁷ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/english-plus-integration-instructional-paradigm-immigrant-adult-learners>

⁸ <https://www.apprenticeship.gov>

⁹ <https://coabe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/COABE-Journal-Spring-2020.pdf>, p. 25

¹⁰ <https://dos.ny.gov/professional-pathways-high-skilled-immigrants-ona-job-coach-locations>

¹¹ <https://mn.gov/deed/programs-services/adult-career-pathways/grants/internationally>

¹² <https://vcwnorthern.com/refugees>



including the development of targeted services for immigrants and refugees with credentials from another country.

- Through policy guidance or other levers, DOL should encourage American Job Centers to partner with community-based groups to increase the ability of the workforce system to serve New Americans. These groups have the necessary experience, local knowledge, and community trust and may be those that the DOL highlights in the BTG report, which would have the dual effect of improving the system while also securing federal investment in programs that already serve WIOA priority populations.
- Revised WIOA and workforce performance measures should ensure that such measures support (or at a minimum do not discourage) inclusive workforce systems. Performance measures should reflect those required by WIOA legislation, but DOL could encourage additional measures, as it did through its [Training and Enhancement Guidance Letter](#), to help gauge the ability of the workforce system to meet the needs of all populations.

DOL should also incentivize states, workforce agencies, and job centers to match internationally educated immigrants and refugees with jobs that are commensurate with their experience, rather than focusing on rapid-attachment strategies.

- DOL should support and encourage the placement of New American navigators at local job centers, working either independently or in partnership with local adult education programs or immigrant-serving non-profits.¹³ Many workforce/American Job Centers already offer individual career services through workforce navigators and case managers,¹⁴ often successfully building inclusion by focusing on underserved and priority populations such as veterans or youth formerly in foster care. New American navigators can help to address access issues, by providing culturally appropriate services and outreach and education. Promising models to build on include navigator programs piloted in New York, Larimer County in Colorado, and Michigan.¹⁵

¹³ <https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/14175EARNNavigatorSpotlight.pdf>, p. 5

¹⁴ <https://www.edsi.com/blog/wioa-career-navigation-offers-more-career-services-at-american-job-centers>

¹⁵ <https://www.wes.org/partners/gtb-blog/updated-imprint-map-tracks-trends-in-immigrant-professional-integration-programs-across-the-u-s>



- DOL should encourage a stronger commitment to workforce programs that integrate contextualized English language learning into career training, upskilling, and apprenticeship programs, especially in in-demand professions. This includes support for job-aligned English language learning opportunities such as federally funded apprenticeship programs and pre-apprenticeship programs.¹⁶ Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs that combine adult education and English language instruction with workforce readiness and training in specific occupations are one example of a model that is already in practice.¹⁷
- To ensure that the 20 percent of our workforce who are immigrants and refugees are positioned to benefit from investments in workforce and apprenticeship programs, the DOL must analyze program applicant and participant data to ensure equitable access for all those who are eligible.
- Beyond the above recommendations, the federal government should expand its support to state and local workforce development agencies and programs to address the unique challenges facing immigrant and refugee job seekers across all levels of educational attainment. DOL, the Department of Education (DOE), and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should more closely coordinate their efforts to strengthen and expand adult education and workforce development programs and ensure that they are equipped to serve immigrants and refugees—including those who have credentials earned outside the U.S.

3. Address Social and Cultural Barriers to Professional Integration

Many states and localities have launched efforts to engage with employers, service providers, academic institutions, and community-based partners. The goal is to address the structural barriers, biases, and job quality issues that limit the workforce and educational inclusion of immigrants and refugees. The Utah Center for Immigration & Integration,¹⁸ for example, convenes business stakeholders to identify pathways to recruit and retain global talent. The regional economic development collaborative Global Detroit¹⁹ works with state colleges and universities and employers to support access to opportunity for immigrant students and workers. To strengthen and expand such efforts and bring them to scale nationally, WES recommends the following:

¹⁶ <https://coabe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/COABE-Journal-Spring-2020.pdf>, p. 13;

<https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2024/RD20/PDF>

¹⁷ <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/WIOA-IET-Model-Programs.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://business.utah.gov/immigration>

¹⁹ <https://globaldetroitmi.org>



- DOL and the Department of Commerce (DOC) should build on the principles in the Good Jobs Initiative. This would mean leveraging their policy guidance and convening power to promote state and local employer partnerships and workforce collaboratives focused on improving job design and job quality for immigrants, English language learners, and other marginalized groups.²⁰
- DOL should provide training and resources to increase the awareness and capabilities of American Job Center and other workforce development staff who work in communities with New American populations eligible yet underserved. Such training should include topics such as credential evaluations and misconceptions about immigration status and service eligibility. The goal would be to demystify international experience and education and enable workforce development personnel to assess skills, expertise, and backgrounds to help connect New Americans with jobs and careers that build on their work experience overseas.
- DOE should provide guidance to state departments of higher education and higher education institutions (HEIs) on better supporting immigrant and English language learner students around issues of enrollment, academic and career planning, eligibility for financial aid, and transfer of international education credits and degrees. This guidance should target HEI departments including admissions, financial aid, and academic and career advising. Relevant supports include access to career and college navigators and other resources designed to help immigrant and refugee students persist and succeed in the U.S. higher education system and beyond.

4. Support Enhanced Data Collection Efforts

As the BTG report highlights, existing national survey and program data fail to fully capture the workforce trajectories of this critical segment of the U.S. workforce. This includes the unique career barriers that immigrants and refugees face as well as the challenges they encounter in accessing services through the U.S. workforce system and navigating pathways to professional licensure. To address these limitations, WES recommends:

- DOL and DOE should work with the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics to include questions in the American Community Survey and Current Population Survey about educational credentials and work experience and professional certifications and licenses issued outside the U.S.²¹

²⁰ <https://www.dol.gov/general/good-jobs/principles>

²¹ Questions about U.S. credentials and licenses are already part of the Current Population Survey; see <https://www.bls.gov/cps/certifications-and-licenses-faqs.htm>.



- The federal government should review information gathered in pre-arrival processing, such as through the Department of State’s refugee processing centers, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, or the new Safe Mobility Office pilots, to ascertain whether datasets currently collected can be used (or can be expanded to be used) to better understand immigrants’ languages, skills, and credentials. Such aggregate data could be used by the DOL, local workforce bodies, and state and local policymakers and workforce partners to increase their ability to match newly arriving populations with skill-aligned employment.
- DOL should work with DOE and other relevant agencies and sub-agencies to conduct a review of the systems currently collecting data related to workforce access for immigrants and refugees, with the purpose of finding opportunities to improve data relevance and quality and better integrate data collection systems across agencies and services.
- Federal agencies should expand the reach of surveys like the Annual Survey of Refugees to collect data that allow for comparison of integration outcomes based on various factors. These should include admissions groups (for example, refugees versus temporary protected status aka TPS holders), de-identified household income data by admissions groups (a critical factor for understanding immigrant communities’ eligibility and access to safety net programs), and longitudinal information on long-standing immigrant communities in the U.S.
- The federal government should partner with state and local governments, especially in areas with significant immigrant and refugee populations, to collect and share additional survey and program data on internationally trained immigrants and refugees. Such data could be used to identify successful state and local strategies and national trends for expansion or replication. This includes efforts like the New Pennsylvanians Licensure Survey,²² which gathered information on the licensure history and level of education and training of immigrants applying for occupational licenses.
- All these enhanced data collection efforts should include robust privacy protections and be done in the aggregate, whenever possible. If personally identifiable data are collected alongside immigration status or country of origin, there must be fortified privacy controls—including restrictions on how the U.S. government or its partners

²²<https://www.dos.pa.gov/ProfessionalLicensing/Documents/New%20Pennsylvanians%20Licensure%20Survey%20-%20Final%20-%202012.16.21.pdf>



may use such data—and the provision of such data points should be optional for New Americans unless required for eligibility purposes.

5. Increased and Better-Leveraged Funding for Occupational Credentialing and Workforce Integration Programs

While credentialing and licensure are typically the responsibility of states, federal investments can play a key role in reducing barriers for internationally trained professionals seeking to transfer their educational and professional experience to the U.S. labor market. Given the positive impact of integrating immigrants and refugees into the workforce and the long-standing shortfall in funding for workforce services for this population, there is also need for increased and better-leveraged funding at both the federal and state levels. That includes in both WIOA Title I and Title II appropriations, state Title II matching funds, and other funding streams such as federal grants to community colleges. Ensuring immigrant workers can take advantage of these services also means access to wraparound supports that address barriers to workforce program participation for low-income workers, including childcare, transportation, housing, and health care. To meet these goals, WES recommends the following:

- **Occupational Credentialing and Licensure**
 - The cost of obtaining a credential evaluation, along with fees related to testing, test prep, and licensure applications, can pose a significant financial hurdle. DOL should expand allowable expenses for individual training accounts (ITAs), which are typically limited to short-term services, to include credential evaluation and licensure costs. It should also increase WIOA Title I funding for this program. Following models in Texas and Nevada, DOL should provide guidance, as DOE did for WIOA Title II funds, on how WIOA Title I funds and other public workforce funds can be leveraged to pay for credential evaluations.²³
- **Language Education:**
 - The appropriation for WIOA Title II English and adult basic education services should be significantly increased. The focus should be on ensuring that such services dovetail with other workforce programs to ensure that barriers to work or program participation, such as lack of credential recognition or English proficiency, are holistically addressed.

²³ <https://www.wes.org/partners/gtb-blog/siip-best-practices-using-federal-and-state-funding-to-pay-for-credential-evaluations>



- More generally, the federal government should direct and encourage increased funding toward programs for English language learners, especially programs using flexible and innovative frameworks that are responsive to immigrants with a wide range of educational and occupational backgrounds. DOL should help by clarifying the ways in which workforce-related funding streams complementary to DOE’s WIOA Title II funds can be used to support English language programs.
- Building on the increased focus on digital literacy in the WIOA reauthorization conversations, and in alignment with the Digital Equity Act’s²⁴ designation of English language learners as a priority population, funding for English and job training programs should include support for strengthening participants’ digital literacy. This includes promoting access to digital technology, including broadband internet, and developing high-quality digital content leading to increased education and employment opportunities. Attention should also be given to development of digital and other skills that equip workers for success in the face of increasing automation and AI-driven industry changes.
- **Career Services**
 - Alongside increased funding of adult basic education programs, the federal government should support targeted workforce training and career navigation services to help internationally trained immigrants advance their careers in the U.S. In addition to strengthening services for this population at community colleges and American Job Centers, DOL should follow the models of states like New York and Minnesota and create a competitive grant program to support immigrant-serving organizations and other workforce intermediaries. Grant activities could include vocational training, job coaching, career navigation, and other services that assist immigrant professionals in entering occupations that match their prior education and experience.
- **Community Colleges**
 - The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (known as Perkins V) funds career-oriented credit and non-credit programming at both secondary schools and community and technical colleges that serve many immigrant students, internationally trained professionals included. English language learners are among the special populations required to be served. Perkins V funding should be expanded, with guidance provided on how grants can be used to support diverse student populations and how state plans

²⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr1841/BILLS-117hr1841ih.xml>



should align Perkins V with workforce and career training programming (funded by WIOA and other federal funding sources) that serves these groups.

- **Wraparound Services to Address Opportunity Barriers**
 - WIOA Title I, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Employment First programs all may provide funds to assist with client referrals to wraparound services. Such services may include childcare, transportation, housing, health care, and mental health services—all of which aid workers in accessing and retaining secure, skill- appropriate, and well-paying jobs. As recent research has shown,²⁵ the shortage of free or low-cost childcare as well as administrative barriers and a lack of culturally responsive options pose a particular barrier to workforce participation for immigrant women. The federal government needs to support states in reducing such administrative hurdles for all low-income workers and their families, including New Americans. Additionally, the federal government should create guidance that emphasizes the importance of using trusted community-based service providers and encourage states to ask only for immigration status documentation needed to make an eligibility determination for program participation.

Overall, WES celebrates the release of the Bridging the Gap for New Americans report and recognizes its importance as a historic first. We continue to encourage the federal government to utilize research, data, and best practices to chart a course of inclusion for our workforce systems. Many of these best practices exist at the state and local level. Yet as our demographics continue to shift, and as we face economic threats resulting from workforce shortages and population decline, the federal government *itself* will need to address and improve workforce integration of New Americans to future-proof our economy for generations. Our country has always relied on immigrant labor to power its economy, and meeting today’s challenges and opportunities, as the report notes, will require collective efforts by federal and state policymakers, educators, employers, and community-based partners. DOL can and should lead in these efforts. WES continues to be committed to working with DOL and other stakeholders to build a more inclusive U.S. workforce where everyone can thrive—because when we thrive as individuals, our nation, and its economy, thrives as well.

²⁵ <https://www.upwardlyglobal.org/news/news/how-to-advance-immigrant-womens-access-to-childcare-policy-brief>