INVESTING IN PEOPLE AND PLACE:

Strategies for Equitable Workforce Development

THE CONSERVATION FUND

Contents

Acknowledgment

The Conservation Fund gratefully acknowledges the Bezos Earth Fund for its generous support of this national resource guide. This publication was made possible through the Bezos Earth Fund's investment in organizations and community leaders working to create greener, healthier, and more resilient communities across the United States.

This guide was developed with support from the Bezos Earth Fund's Greening America's Cities program, a national initiative that expands equitable access to parks, trees, community gardens, nature trails, and other urban green spaces. The program began by supporting community-led projects in Albuquerque, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Wilmington, Delaware, and has since expanded to six additional cities nationwide. Through partnerships with community-based organizations, local governments, technical experts, and philanthropic institutions, it supports efforts ranging from community engagement and project planning to land acquisition, design, construction, workforce development, and long-term stewardship.

The lessons, practices, and resources presented in this guide reflect the experiences of community organizations and practitioners advancing equitable urban conservation and community development.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the Bezos Earth Fund for recognizing the value of community-driven solutions and supporting the creation of a resource designed to share knowledge nationally. We hope this guide provides community organizations, public agencies, funders, and other partners with practical information to help transform promising ideas into enduring community assets.

THE CONSERVATION FUND

Overview of The Conservation Fund

The Conservation Fund is a U.S. nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting land, water, and wildlife while fostering sustainable economies and vibrant communities. With a dual charter to pursue environmental preservation and economic development, The Conservation Fund believes environmental protection and economic vitality must work together. It works with community and government leaders, businesses, landowners, conservation nonprofits and other partners to integrate economic and environmental objectives. Since its founding in 1985, the organization has leveraged innovative financing and rapid land acquisition to secure over 9 million acres across all 50 states—ensuring nature and people thrive together.

Urban Conservation and Community

The Conservation Fund's Urban Conservation & Community program is grounded in a simple belief: communities are strongest when they have lasting access to land and green space that serves public benefit. Across cities and neighborhoods, we work alongside community-based organizations, local governments, and resident leaders to turn locally driven ideas into permanent community assets—places that improve health, strengthen resilience, and reflect the identity and priorities of the people who live there.

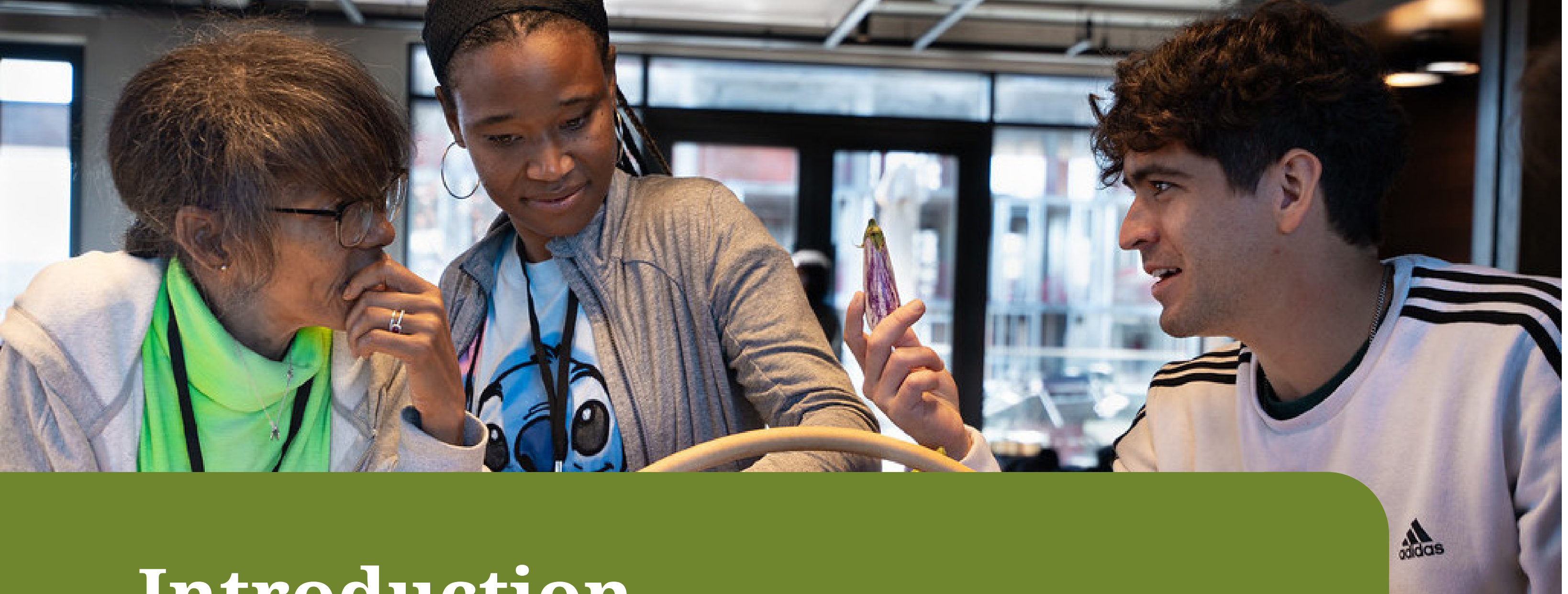
Our role is to bring conservation expertise, catalytic funding, and strategic partnerships together in service of community goals. We help identify opportunities, navigate complex land transactions, support planning and design, and connect local efforts to national networks of investment and technical assistance. In doing so, we strengthen the capacity of community organizations to lead projects that are environmentally sound, economically meaningful, and rooted in local priorities.

GOALS

Urban Conservation and Community Goals

Secure land for lasting public benefit by helping communities gain durable, sustainable control of the places and infrastructure that shape their futures.

- Advance innovative models of community ownership and governance that give residents a meaningful voice in how urban green spaces are created, protected, and sustained.
- Strengthen community-based leadership by equipping local organizations with the tools, resources, and partnerships needed to activate, manage, and steward transformational green spaces.
- Drive investment toward historically under-resourced communities to help repair inequities, expand access to nature, and ensure that the benefits of conservation reach the people and places that need them most.



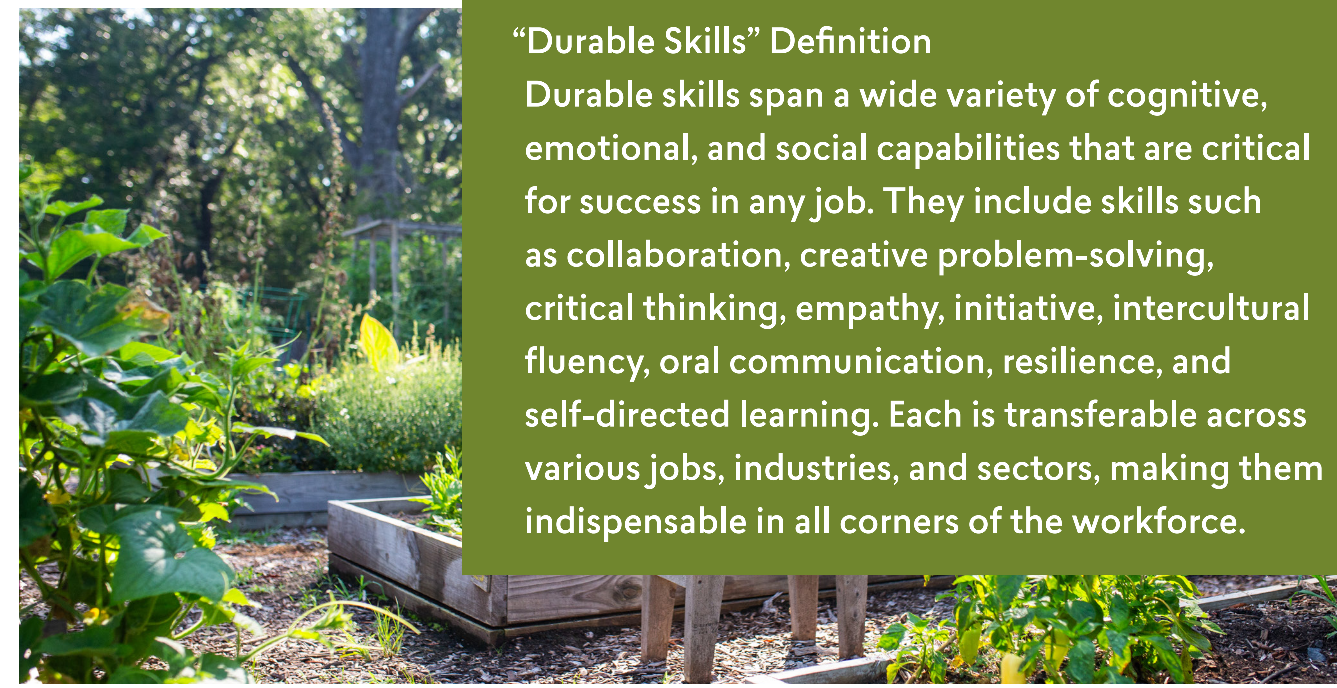
Introduction

At its core, the mission of workforce development is two-fold: to ensure workers have the skills they need to succeed in the labor market and to connect employers with a talented pool of job ready candidates. Through a mix of education and training providers, intermediary organizations, philanthropy, support services, and economic development, the workforce development ecosystem aims to upskill workers, respond to employer needs, close equity gaps, and adapt to the evolving demands of the labor market. In addition to employers, workers who have specific barriers to employment; historically overlooked talent pools; individuals who have been out of work for long periods; or even youth new to the workforce are all served by a region's workforce development ecosystem.

What are job training programs?

Job training programs offer one method by which prospective workers can gain the skills and knowledge necessary to obtain, retain, or advance in a career. As part of a region's larger workforce development strategy, job training programs are a key component in creating and sustaining a viable, skilled workforce that can support current and future business and industry needs. Operated by communitybased organizations (CBOs),community colleges, the local workforce board, and other intermediary organizations, job training programs cater to individuals who may face barriers to rewarding work, including youth, justice-impacted individuals, people with disabilities, or new members of a community.

Through a mix of industry-specific skills training, "durable skills" coaching, and job search support, these programs serve as a critical bridge, connecting workers to fulfilling careers while building the regional pipeline of skilled talent in a particular high-growth or high-need industry.



"Durable Skills" Definition

Durable skills span a wide variety of cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities that are critical for success in any job. They include skills such as collaboration, creative problem-solving, critical thinking, empathy, initiative, intercultural fluency, oral communication, resilience, and self-directed learning. Each is transferable across various jobs, industries, and sectors, making them indispensable in all corners of the workforce.

The growing green economy offers a fertile training ground for prospective workers, providing exposure to green careers while simultaneously equipping trainees with critical, transferable workplace navigation skills to support career growth. Job training in both existing roles like stormwater management, ecological restoration, green infrastructure installation, or urban forestry, as well as in yet-to-be-created roles, also benefit local geographies through environmental investments and economic returns. As the sector seeks to diversify its workforce demographics, job training programs offer an exceptional opportunity to recruit new talent, exposing workers from all backgrounds to new career pathway options. FInally, the hands-on nature and manual labor required in conservation work lends itself well to providing sector-specific, transitional job opportunities, offering organizations the ability to

- Increase potential workers' exposure and interest in urban conservation careers
- Provide quality, paid work opportunities for local residents
- Develop a green economy talent pipeline in coordination with local employers
- Supplement or augment their own workforce in response to organizational needs
- Build careers *and* support positive change for local communities

Transitional jobs are subsidized, time-limited, paid work experiences designed to help individuals with significant barriers to employment establish a work history and successfully move into the unsubsidized labor market.

Who is this guidebook for?

This guidebook is intended for community-based organizations interested in starting or expanding a job training program as a component of their overall operations. Practical advice to support informed, research-backed decisions is provided throughout, in addition to best practices in program design, resources for further exploration, and additional considerations to support program customization. Programs at different stages of development should focus on the sections most relevant to their current needs, returning to others as they scale. And remember, no two programs are alike — the considerations and program elements described throughout will necessarily need to be adapted to fit your local community context, target population, and sector focus.

Getting Started

If you're considering launching a job training program, there are several considerations you'll want to weigh as you begin designing. Understanding your why, who, what, where, and when–in that order–will lay the groundwork for you to develop your how.

1. Your 'Why': Purpose/Mission:

First, understand your why. Why do you want to embed a job training program as part of your organizational operations? Are you hoping to increase exposure to green careers for young people in your community? Do you need extra, seasonal help that a paid work experience could provide? Or, do you want to support local employers to increase their talent pipelines? You may be interested in doing one or all of these things. Naming your intention and the impact you're hoping to have through a job training program is a foundational first step to building your program. Once you define your purpose, that will serve as your north star through all the other decision points.

2. Your 'Who': Target Population:

Second, identify your who. Who are you trying to reach with this program? Maybe you want to work with youth to provide early exposure to green career opportunities. Or maybe you want to target justice-impacted individuals to provide paid work experiences for an oft-overlooked talent pipeline. Or maybe you're trying to connect with midcareer professionals looking to re-skill or up-skill in the urban conservation space. To help you answer this question, think about the type of person who could benefit most from the training and employment opportunity you're developing, who might be most successful, and who you feel most equipped to support. Identify their characteristics and traits, develop mini personas, and talk to actual job seekers to help narrow in on your target population.

3. Your 'What': Focus Area:

Third, determine your what. What is the focus of the training you are offering to your target population? Think about what your organization is known for. What areyour core competencies? What do you feel most equipped to train workers in? What types of career(s) are you hoping to increase exposure to or pipelines in? Are you known for your work designing, planting, and caring for urban green spaces? Do you run an urban farm to provide fresh food for local communities? Are you an arborist specializing in tree planting, expansion, and preservation? All of these focus areas offer a foundation for developing a strong training program.

4. Your 'Where and When':

Fourth, evaluate where and when your program should take place. If you're working with youth, your programming may need to take place in the summer months to accommodate school schedules. Or, maybe you'd like to offer year-round programming, but are focused on urban greenspace restoration and seasonal weather conditions limit the timing and duration of your training program. Or you want to develop arborist skills, but must be dependent on a local forest preserve to provide the physical location necessary to complete the hands-on training. Understanding who you're providing training to and what type of training you're focused on will necessarily help you narrow down where and when your program should take place.

5. Your 'How': Program Model:

Once you have made decisions on the above, the fifth and final consideration you'll have to unpack is the how. How will you design an impactful job training program that best serves the needs of the population(s) you've identified, the needs of your organization, the needs of local employers, and the needs of the larger conservation community? These meaty decisions will be unpacked in the remainder of the guidebook, including:

a. Program Structure: duration, timing, size, cohort structure, and other scheduling considerations.

b. Program Elements: participant recruitment, intake processes, curriculum and training, wrap-around supports, referrals, and employer engagement strategies.

c. Staffing and Internal Operations: ideal ratios and roles, and key metrics and outcomes.

d. Wrap-Around Supports: referral partnerships and typical support services.

e. Funding: types of public and private funding available to support programming.

Green Team of English Avenue

Getting Started: Purpose & Mission In Practice
Who: Green Team of English Avenue
Location: Atlanta, GA

Mission: "Dedicated to improving, monitoring and maintaining the green infrastructure in the community's three city parks... empowering residents to act as stewards of their environment and fostering a sense of ownership and community pride." (Ray C. Anderson Foundation, 2024)

Quick Stats: 12 teenagers employed each summer; 7-week program, 4 days/week, $15/hour.

When Annie Moore began maintaining a flood management park in Atlanta's English Avenue neighborhood in 2010, her goal was simply to invest in the community where she lives. What followed over the next decade is one of the clearest illustrations available of what it looks like to build a program from purpose outward. English Avenue had dealt with recurring flooding and years of disinvestment. Built to manage storm water that had long overwhelmed the area, the park is one of the few green spaces the neighborhood has. For Annie, maintaining it was less a program decision than a community one at first. Bringing in local teenagers each summer was a natural extension of the same idea: that the people who live in a neighborhood can and should be the ones caring for it. Green Team was formally incorporated in 2022, twelve years after it started, because organizational form was always secondary to the work itself.

Today, with 3–5 part-time staff the program operates a 7-week summer youth employment program serving 12 teenagers, a scale Annie has deliberately maintained because it matches what her team can do well. The teenagers she works with come four days a week for seven weeks over the summer, earning $15 an hour for hands-on park maintenance work that runs from 9am to 1pm. Many of them are returning participants who found their way to the program through word of mouth or Annie's own outreach presentations in the community.

Programs in the early design phase would do well to borrow this orientation: before deciding how many cohorts to run or which certifications to offer, get clear on what you are actually trying to accomplish and for whom, and let those answers constrain and guide every structural decision that follows.

PROGRAM

Program Structure

Program structure — duration, schedule, cohort size — provides the framework for the participant experience. Getting the structure right requires answering several interconnected questions:

- How many workers can you reasonably and effectively serve in a year? In a summer?
- How many days a week will workers be on-the-job? How many hours per day?
- How many days or weeks will your program run?
- How many times do you want to run your program in a year? In a summer?

Making these decisions will require you to know the limits of your organizational capacity, ensure alignment with funder expectations, and be clear about the impact you're trying to make on both workers and the community.

The case for cohort-based programming

Reduced attrition through shared accountability
The most consistent finding across workforce development research is that cohort models significantly reduce attrition. Generally, a 'cohort' refers to a group of individuals who start a program or course together and move through all the requirements as a unified group until completion or graduation. When participants move through a program together on a shared schedule, they develop accountability relationships with peers that substitute for — and often exceed — what program staff alone can provide. For people entering a new field, moving through training alongside others builds a sense of belonging and helps develop stronger long-term sector attachment. For youth populations or those experiencing housing instability, re-entry, or mental health challenges, peer cohort relationships are frequently cited as the primary reason participants stayed enrolled through difficult periods.

Streamlined instruction and services

Cohort scheduling allows programs to invest in quality instruction including skilled trainers, structured curriculum, and field site logistics in ways that self-paced or rolling-enrollment models cannot sustain economically. For example, when 15 people are moving through an arborist training together, you can bring in a master arborist for a full-day field session. When enrollment is continuous and variable, that kind of investment is logistically impossible. Similarly, rolling enrollment creates case management chaos; every participant is at a different stage, facing different decisions, needing different interventions simultaneously. The cohort model makes wrap-around support logistically manageable.

More easily tracked employment outcomes

Employers strongly prefer cohort-based pipelines over individual referrals because they can plan around them. Knowing that a program graduates a cohort of 12–15 certified solar installers every quarter, for example, allows employers to time hiring, structure onboarding, and build relationships with the program. The cohort cadence makes the program predictable and valuable to employers in a way that continuous enrollment can't match. Additionally, cohort-based programs can track 30-, 60-, 90-day, and one-year employment outcomes against clearly defined graduation points. Programs with rolling enrollment struggle to report credible outcomes because the denominator is always shifting.

Tradeoffs

There are a few tradeoffs to consider when offering a cohort model. First, fixed start dates exclude people who become available between cohorts. Someone who is released from prison in February likely cannot wait until September to join a new cohort. Second, cohort models are inherently capacityconstrained. A program running four cohorts of 15 trainees per year only serves 60 people annually. For cities with deep workforce development needs, cohort models alone can't move the needle at population scale. Third, cohort dynamics can go wrong. A single disruptive participant can destabilize a cohort. Programs need explicit community agreements, conflict resolution protocols, and the ability to manage or exit participants without derailing the group.

Despite these tradeoffs cohort-based programming is the evidence-supported best practice, particularly for career-changers and high-barrier participants. The peer accountability, professional identity formation, employer pipeline predictability, and wrap-around service efficiency it enables are structural advantages that no other delivery model has replicated at comparable quality.

Cohort Size

The number of participants in each cohort shapes the quality of instruction, the depth of employer relationships, and the operational workload on staff. Below are considerations to help determine the right size cohort for your training program.

Cohort Size Planning Guide

Use this table to match cohort size to program type, resource availability, and participant needs.

Strength / advantage — Planning consideration — Significant resource demand

Cohort Size	Best For	Key Resource Considerations	Additional Considerations
3–7 micro cohort	• Piloting a new program • Internship rotations • Short-term intensive (4–6 weeks) • Highly customized or specialized training tracks	• Fewest resources required; may run on existing staff • More individualized 1:1 attention and services needed • Application and selection can be bespoke and completed quickly	• Group too small to generate meaningful peer learning dynamics; limited diversity of perspective • Attrition of even 1–2 participants can critically undermine cohort viability • Higher cost-per-participant; harder to justify at scale • Instructor-to-participant ratio may feel more evaluative than supportive
8–12 small cohort	• Piloting a new program • Internship rotations • Short-term intensive (4–6 weeks) • Small work crews (construction, gardening, farming)	• Allows intensive case management and 1:1 connection to wraparound supports • May require additional transportation (e.g., vans) to work sites • Additional staff likely required for training and work supervision	• Still small enough for strong group cohesion and trust-building • Peer learning begins to emerge but may need intentional structure (e.g., paired learning, small breakouts) • Attrition still poses risk: a 20% drop moves cohort into micro range • Employer placement requires fewer relationships

Cohort Size	Best For	Key Resource Considerations	Additional Considerations
15–25 standard cohort	• Most occupational training programs fall into this range • Sector-based training is well suited for this size (e.g., urban greening projects, farming, conservation, restoration)	• Optimal peer learning balance: diverse enough for rich dynamics, small enough for instructor management • May require additional case management for wraparound supports • Will require additional transportation to work sites • Additional staff and/or volunteers required for supervision	• Research shows groups of 15–34 represent the 'medium group' sweet spot for collaborative learning[6] • Sufficient size to absorb some attrition without losing group viability • Enables subgroup structures (pairs, trios) that deepen peer accountability • Requires intentional community-building at program start to prevent cliques or isolation • Demands more robust employer partnerships
26–40 large cohort	• High-demand, scalable programs with proven curricula • Programs with strong employer partnerships to absorb larger graduating classes • Certifications or licensure prep where instruction is more standardized	• Requires additional instructional support staff (co-instructors, TAs) • Dedicated cohort navigators essential to prevent participants from falling through the cracks • More robust employer relationships needed to absorb graduates at scale • Wraparound support coordination becomes significantly more complex	• Peer learning dynamics shift—large group anonymity can reduce individual accountability • Must deliberately structure small breakout groups (8–12) within the larger cohort to preserve peer connection • Higher risk of participant disengagement if not actively managed • Case management ratios become strained, plan for 1 navigator per 12–15 participants • Can dilute program culture if not onboarded with strong community-building rituals

Cohort Tip

Track enrollment-to-completion ratios and plan cohort start sizes to account for expected attrition — most programs should plan for a 10–25% attrition rate at intake and adjust starting enrollment accordingly. Maintain a waitlist for each cohort which allows you to backfill seats quickly when early dropouts occur.

CALLOUT BOX: Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy

Program Structure: Cohorts

Who: Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy

Location: Bay City, MI

Mission: Take action at the intersection of people and nature, elevate landscapes for the benefit of all, provide leadership in conservation.

Quick Stats: Pilot cohort of 6 participants; mix of high school students and non-traditional college students in their early 20s; $20/hour; 30 applicants for 6 spots in year two.

Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy piloted its first workforce development program in the summer of 2025 with six students, and the way Executive Director Zachary Branigan arrived at that number is instructive. He started with the available budget from The Conservation Fund, subtracted staff time, insurance, equipment, fuel, and administrative costs, and divided what remained by a $20/hour wage (his organization's internal minimum for all field staff). Six students was what the math allowed, and it produced a cohort size that two supervising staff members could meaningfully manage in the field.

The six students Saginaw Basin selected came from a mix of backgrounds — high school students and non-traditional college students in their early 20s — and were chosen specifically for their interest in conservation careers (not just any summer work). Zach reviewed applications with a few staff members, looking for candidates who could articulate why this program over other summer jobs, and aimed for a group diverse in age, school, and experience level. It is worth noting that the program received 30 applications for those six spots in year two, a meaningful signal that reputation builds quickly when the work is real and the wages are competitive.

Program Timing & Duration

When, how often, and how long a program runs are important design decisions that impact participant recruitment, retention, and outcomes. Programs that are too short may leave participants without the depth of skills future employers require; programs that are too long risk losing participants who cannot sustain participation due to outside obligations. Additionally, trainees may face childcare, transportation, or second-job constraints that make standard 9-to-5 schedules prohibitive. Flexible scheduling accommodations such as hybrid learning options, childcare stipends, or Saturday intensives can significantly improve completion rates among populations facing the highest barriers. All of these decisions can affect employer pipeline alignment, participant completion rates, and program operational efficiency.

FAST FACT

In general, the sweet spot for occupational skills training programs (e.g., internships, transitional jobs) is 8-16 weeks. Research is clear that longer programs produce stronger sustained outcomes. Short-term training (2–6 weeks) can build awareness but rarely produces durable wage gains. Programs of 10–16 weeks or longer, especially those leading to industry-recognized credentials, show the most consistent earnings impact.

Scheduling Considerations:

- Particularly important: Evening or weekend programs may increase participants' ability to attend, but can cause additional strain on your staff's organizational capacity or negatively impact participant learning due to increased fatigue.
- Building in buffer weeks between cohorts allows for staff recovery, curriculum updates, and employer relationship maintenance.
- Cohorts offered on a rolling or quarterly basis may better align with local employer hiring cycles and reduce participant wait times from intake to start.
- If you plan to offer a specific credential or certifications as part of your program, allow for sufficient learning and practice time aligned to those requirements. For example, embedding the OSHA 30 and CPR/First Aid certifications in your program to teach participants about safety laws and regulations related to personal protective equipment, electrical hazards, and equipment safety, will require a full week, as the two trainings combined are approximately 40 hours.

Program Elements

Strong program elements are the building blocks that determine who gets served, what they learn, and where they end up. Recruitment drives the pipeline and curriculum delivers the transformation while employer engagement converts training into careers. All three must be designed together and in consideration of the others.

Recruitment

Effective recruitment ensures your program reaches the right candidates: those who are ready to engage with training and who will benefit most from the opportunity. Poor recruitment leads to low completion rates, mismatched expectations, and strained employer relationships. Targeting the right individuals for your program is a multi-pronged endeavor, and often done in coordination and collaboration with local organizations, rather than broad outreach. The goal is to reach the individuals you identified in your initial planning (e.g., youth, returning citizens, people with disabilities, etc.).

Recruitment Tips

- Build a referral network with trusted community partners: American Job Centers, community health centers, reentry programs, housing agencies, faith communities, and public libraries. These organizations have direct relationships with your target population and can make warm referrals.
- Train your referral partners on your program's eligibility criteria, intake process, and what to tell candidates. A well-briefed referral partner sends better-matched candidates.
- Meet candidates where they are; host information sessions in community locations (libraries, churches, community centers, school career days) rather than requiring prospective participants to come to your offices.
- Invest in alumni as recruiters; satisfied program graduates are among your most credible and effective recruiters in the communities you serve.
- Leverage social media thoughtfully; Facebook and Nextdoor tend to reach adults in lowerincome communities more effectively than Instagram or LinkedIn for initial outreach.

Trauma-Informed Practice

As summarized and defined in Shift Work Forward's (formerly known as the National Fund for Workforce Solutions) report , A Trauma-Informed Approach to Workforce:.

"Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Trauma results from a variety of sources, including adverse childhood experiences, race-related or racial trauma, and secondary or vicarious trauma. There are other toxically stressful and traumatic experiences that can affect an individual: natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, and war and combat. Living in poverty and the constant state of deprivation is also a traumatic experience."

Many participants in workforce development programs have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), housing instability, system involvement, or are living in poverty. Trauma informed practice means designing your program environment, staff interactions, and policies to avoid re-traumatization and build trust. Key principles include: safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity. Training all staff, not just case managers, in trauma-informed approaches produces measurable improvements in participant retention and satisfaction.

Intake

Once you have recruited a pool of interested candidates, conducting a standardized intake assessment is paramount to align expectations, ensure a strong fit, and reduce future attrition. Intake processes should be accessible, not intimidating. Rather than requiring extensive upfront paperwork, staff can prioritize a more informal, but structured, initial conversation to assess readiness and fit, including motivation, schedule availability, and potential barriers. Having a standard approach helps eliminate bias in the selection process. Intake is also the time to be explicit with candidates about program expectations around time commitment, pace, work requirements, and post-program obligations.

Designing an effective intake process

1. Conduct an initial assessment that captures both basic eligibility information and more strengths-based information about potential candidates. Many funding streams require basic information such as income, family status, educational attainment, etc. to be collected to determine eligibility. However, those questions often tend to be deficit-based and don't tell you much about candidates themselves. Probing deeper on an individual's strengths, skills, career interests, and values is likely to reveal much more detailed information to help you determine fit. See inset for example strength-based interest and fit intake questions.
2. Use multiple tools to assess interests, values, and barriers together rather than relying on a single instrument. Assessment tools serve different purposes in the workforce investment system. For example, interest inventories play an important role in career planning. Skills and ability tests can reveal current levels, indicate training needs, and predict an individual's success in training. Assessment tools can also be used to assess an individual's progress in training or to evaluate the effectiveness of a training program itself.
3. Use a trauma-informed approach to identify barriers to employment. In-depth interviews and evaluations to identify employment barriers help staff understand participants' current situations, immediate needs, goals, strengths, and challenges. Becoming "trauma-informed" is a key first step to understanding and connecting with participants. This means knowing the definition of trauma, understanding how it affects the brain, and what signs to look for in participant behavior.

CALLOUT BOX: Interest and Fit Intake Questions

Strengths

- Self-perception: What do you think you bring to a team that other people might not? When are you at your best? What's a skill you've gotten compliments on more than once, even if you don't think it's a big deal? What comes easily to you that seems to be hard for other people?
- Evidence-based: Tell me about a specific situation where one of your strengths made a real difference. What happened, what did you do, and what was the result? Describe a time someone came to you for help with something specific. What were they asking for? What strength helped you handle a recent stressful or high-pressure moment well?
- Transferable strengths: What have you learned to do well through parenting, caregiving, volunteering, or other unpaid responsibilities that could apply to a job? What strengths have you built through hobbies, sports, or community involvement?
- Growth orientation: Is there a strength you have that you wish you got to use more often? Is there a strength you're still developing that you're proud of the progress on?

Workplace skills

- Technical and hands-on: What specific tools, machinery, software, or equipment have you used, and how recently? Are there any technical skills you have that you don't currently have certification or documentation for? Have you operated under any safety protocols or compliance standards (OSHA, food handling, etc.)?
- Digital literacy: How would you rate your comfort with email, basic spreadsheets, and typing? Have you used any scheduling, point-of-sale, or workplace management apps? Are you comfortable learning new software on the job, or do you prefer hands-on training?
- Soft skills, with specifics: Tell me about a time you had to resolve a disagreement with a coworker or customer. What did you do? How do you typically handle being given multiple tasks with competing deadlines? Describe a time you had to learn something quickly on the job. What's your approach when you don't know how to do something you're asked to do?

Workplace Skills

- Leadership and responsibility: Have you ever been responsible for training, supervising, or being accountable for someone else's work? What was that like? Have you ever had to make a decision on your own without a supervisor available?

Career interests

- Exploration: What have you done so far to learn about this field (e.g., talked to someone in it, watched videos, visited a workplace, researched online)? Can you walk me through a typical day in the job you're picturing? What part of that day sounds most appealing, and what part concerns you?
- Environment preferences: Do you prefer working indoors or outdoors, alone or with a team, on a set schedule or one that varies day to day? How do you feel about physically demanding work versus desk-based work? Would you be comfortable in a fast-paced, high-pressure environment, or do you do better with a steady, predictable pace?
- Realistic expectations: What do you imagine starting pay would be in this field, and does that match what you need right now? Are you open to starting in an entry-level role and working up, or do you need to start at a certain level? How far are you willing to travel for the right opportunity?
- Backup planning: If this path doesn't work out the way you hope, is there a second option you'd consider? What would make you walk away from pursuing this field?

Work values

- Trade-offs (these reveal priorities better than open questions alone): If you had to choose, would you rather have higher pay with less flexibility, or lower pay with more flexibility? Would you rather have a stable, predictable job or one with more risk but higher growth potential? Is it more important to you to enjoy your day-to-day tasks, or to feel like your work matters to something bigger?
- Environment and relationships: How important is it to you to feel a sense of belonging or friendship with coworkers? How do you feel about working under close supervision versus having independence to manage your own work? What kind of management style do you work best under?
- Deal breakers and history: Has there ever been a job or workplace situation that felt wrong to you? What made it feel that way? What would make you quit a job, even one that paid well? What's something a previous employer did that you really appreciated, or that you really didn't?
- Long-term orientation: Are you looking for a job right now, or are you trying to build toward a career? How do you think about growth — is it about title and pay, or about learning and skillbuilding?

Equity in Intake

Programs targeting populations with high barriers (e.g.,individuals returning to society after incarceration, limited English proficiency, or out-of-school youth) should seek to remove unnecessary barriers from their intake processes. Requiring a government-issued ID, a fixed address, or a passing score on a timed assessment may screen out qualified candidates who need only modest accommodations. Consider what you truly need at intake versus what can be obtained later.

Curriculum & Training

High-quality workforce development training blends occupational (technical) skills with professional ("durable") skills, and is regularly updated to reflect real employer needs. Curriculum and training should be engaging; role plays, workplace scenario discussions, and guest speakers from employer partners all help to make professional skills instruction concrete and relevant.

Curriculum architecture in the strongest programs integrates four content streams simultaneously rather than sequentially:

- Technical skills specific to the target occupation (e.g., tree care, solar installation, green construction, ecological restoration, etc.). Training should be task-focused and applied, not lecture-heavy. Hands-on field experience should be integrated throughout the program.
- Industry-recognized credentials should be aligned to employer preferences (e.g., ISA Arborist, OSHA 10/30, NABCEP, BPI Building Analyst, NCCER, etc.) and selected based on what local employers actually need.
- Workplace readiness and executive function skills. such as attendance, professional communication, conflict resolution, financial literacy, communication, problem-solving, reliability, and identifying workplace norms should be integrated throughout the curriculum. This is also an opportunity to teach participants about their basic workers' rights, including how to spot and address issues such as misclassification, wage theft, and other labor law violations..
- Career development. skills such as resume development, interview prep, and professional networking should be incorporated to support graduates' transition into non-subsidized employment. As needed, this process also allows trainees to strengthen their digital literacy proficiency through the use of email, scheduling tools, and other online portals.

Wrap-Around Supports

Research consistently shows that individuals facing employment barriers often need more than job training to succeed. Housing instability, lack of transportation, childcare needs, mental health challenges, or legal issues can derail a participant's engagement before they ever reach graduation. Wraparound supports play a critical role in training programs by enabling workers to meet their basic needs while engaged in a program. This is also the component most commonly underfunded and most consequential for completion rates among high-barrier participants. Effective programs do not try to provide all services internally — instead, they build robust referral networks, make warm referrals and maintain active relationships with partner organizations.

Typical Support Services

Transportation Assistance	Financial Supports	Health and Behavioral Health	Housing and Basic Needs	Legal and Reentry	Education and Training
• Bus passes, gas cards, or ride shares to help participants attend training • Van pools to shuttle participants to and from work sites. • Many job sites are not close to public transportation and require special arrangements to ensure participants can get there. • Support to (re)obtain driver's licenses. This can be particularly impactful for individuals who have been previously incarcerated	• Training stipends or hourly wages for on-the-job work. • Program participants should be paid for their work; financial compensation also helps reduce attrition. • Childcare subsidies or referrals to subsidized childcare programs (CCAP, Head Start) • Emergency financial assistance funds for unexpected crises (car repair, utility shutoff, medical expenses) • Access to benefits screening and enrollment (SNAP, Medicaid, EITC, CHIP)	• Mental health counseling — on-site or via telehealth partnership • Substance use treatment referrals and ongoing recovery supports • Health insurance enrollment assistance and connection to community health centers	• Housing navigation and referrals to rapid rehousing or transitional housing programs • Food assistance — on-site food pantry access or SNAP enrollment • Connection to utility assistance programs (LIHEAP) and other basic needs resources	• Legal aid referrals for participants navigating expungement, family court, immigration, or civil legal matters • Reentry navigation support for participants with justice system involvement, including fines and fees, housing restrictions, and licensing barriers • Driver's license restoration assistance (important in regions where driving is essential for employment)	• GED or high school equivalency preparation and testing support • English language learning referrals and contextualiz ed ESL integration where feasible • Bridge education connecting workforce programs to community college pathways

Quick Tip

Establish a small emergency fund (even $5,000–$15,000) that case managers can deploy quickly for participants in crisis. Lack of or limited access to emergency assistance is often the difference between a participant staying enrolled or dropping out.

Best Practices for Developing and Maintaining a Referral Network

- Map your participants' most common unmet needs using intake assessment data, and prioritize referral relationships with organizations that address those needs.
- Create an internal resource guide and keep it current. Assign a staff person to update it quarterly and verify that partner contacts and service availability are accurate. This same staff person should also be responsible for maintaining referral partner relationships, conducting quarterly check-ins, and troubleshooting referral breakdowns.
- Distinguish between a warm referral (staff personally connecting participants to a partner) and a cold referral (simply sharing a phone number). Warm referrals produce dramatically higher service uptake.
- Formalize key partnerships with MOUs that define referral processes, data sharing permissions, and mutual expectations, including response time commitments from partner organizations.
- Track referral outcomes: whether participants followed through on referrals, what services they received, and whether those services addressed their needs. Use this data to refine your referral network over time.

CALLOUT BOX: Growing Home

Program Elements: Wrap-Around Supports
Who: Growing Homel
Location: Chicago, IL

Mission: To operate, promote, and demonstrate the use of organic urban agriculture as a vehicle for job training, employment, and community development.

Quick Stats: Serve 100 adults per year across four 12-week cohorts; participants earn $17/hour for hands-on farm work and classroom job readiness training.

Growing Home's Farm Track program serves returning citizens, individuals experiencing homelessness, and others facing significant barriers to employment. And, the referral ecosystem they've cultivated over time reflects a clear-eyed understanding that job training alone rarely moves the needle for workers with these types of barriers. Over many years, Growing Home has built a referral network that addresses the specific, practical barriers its participants face: Ventra cards and gas cards cover transportation to and from training for the first two to three weeks until participants receive their first paycheck; Phoenix Rising provides shelter referrals for participants without stable housing; Nourishing Hope operates a monthly food box pickup at Growing Home's site; Cabrini Green Legal Aid (CGLA) and Teamwork Englewood assist eligible participants with record sealing and expungement; America's Best provides glasses vouchers; and the Chicago Furniture Bank helps formerly homeless participants furnish new housing. None of these supports require Growing Home to hire additional staff, however they allow the program to extend its reach considerably without extending its payroll. The lesson for programs in the design phase is to resist the urge to replicate every element of this ecosystem at once. Identify the two or three barriers most likely to derail your specific participant population, build intentional referral relationships around those before your first cohort begins, and add from there.

Job Placement & Retention Services

High-performing programs make warm introductions, facilitate employer interviews on-site during training, and set concrete placement targets with timelines. For example, Trees Atlanta's Urban Forestry Career Pathways program sets a goal of placing each trainee in a green job within 30 days of graduation.

Most programs terminate formal support at job placement, but the highest-attrition period is often the first 90 days of employment when participants are navigating new workplace cultures, transportation logistics, and the shock of full-time work schedules. Best practice is to provide a minimum of 6–12 months of post-placement follow-up: regular check-ins with both the participant and the employer, rapid response to emerging problems, and connections to advancement opportunities. Alumni networks can help formalize this by creating peer support, mentorship from more advanced alumni, and continued access to professional development and career ladder information. Empower peer mentors or program graduates as near-peer navigators; individuals with lived experience matching that of your participants are often more effective at connecting participants to services than professional staff alone.

Employer Engagement

Employers are not just the destination for your graduates, they are essential co-designers of your program. Meaningful employer engagement produces better curricula, smoother job placements, and more sustainable funding relationships. Programs that build employer relationships after designing curriculum reliably underperform those that co-design with employers from the start.

Suggested Levels of Employer Engagement

TIER 1: ADVISORY LEVEL

Employers participate in an Industry Advisory Council, providing inputon curriculum, skills gaps, and hiring trends.

Share labor market data, program updates, and graduate profiles via newsletter or annual report. Low time commitment; broad engagement.

TIER 2: INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL

Employer staff serve as guest lecturers, technical advisors, or curriculum reviewers.

Medium commitment; deepens curriculum relevance.

TIER 3: EXPERIENTIAL LEVEL

Employers provide job shadows, site visits, mock interviews, or paid work experience slots within the program. Higher commitment; high impact on participant readiness.

TIER 4: HIRING LEVEL

Employers commit to interviewing program graduates and filling open positions from your pipeline.

The deepest form of engagement; requires strong trust and program quality.

Building & Maintaining Employer Relationships

- Assign a dedicated employer relationship manager or business services staff person whose primary role is cultivating and maintaining employer partnerships.
- Lead with value to the employer, not a request for charity. Frame your program in terms of how it solves their talent pipeline challenges, reduces turnover costs, and allows access to a prescreened candidate pool.
- Start small: Secure a pilot commitment from one or two employers before pursuing broad employer engagement. Early wins build credibility and referrals.
- Create formal Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) or employer partnership agreements that define each party's commitments and expectations.
- Follow up consistently and personally after placements. Employers who feel they can trust your team to stand behind graduates become repeat hiring partners.
- Conduct post-placement check-ins with both graduates and their supervisors at 30, 60, and 90 days to catch and address issues before they result in termination.
- Host annual employer appreciation events and share aggregate outcome data to demonstrate the pipeline's quality and reach.
- Develop a 'talent pipeline report' for employer partners that provides visibility into upcoming cohorts, graduation timelines, and the skills of graduates ready to hire.

CALLOUT BOX: Green Teen Alliance

Program Elements: Employer Engagement & Career Pathways
Who: Green Teen Alliance / Missouri Botanical Garden
Location: St. Louis, MO
Mission: A coalition of organizations transforming the land and our relationship with it by engaging youth from historically marginalized communities in environmental work to grow the future of the green workforce.

Quick Stats: 5 member organizations; The Missouri Botanical Garden offers an Outdoor Youth Corps: up to 20 youth per cohort, ages 16–20, 8-week summer program plus year-round weekend series and alternative spring break; and an Outdoor Leadership Corps: post-secondary, preference for non-traditional students, includes 4 workforce development days; $15/hour across all GTA member organizations.

The St. Louis Green Teen Alliance is a network of five organizations that have come together tooperate as a coordinated pipeline, sharing recruitment channels, compensation structures, andbest practices across independently run programs. The Missouri Botanical Garden (MOBOT) serves as the fiscal agent for donated funds, and all organizational members pool resources to support joint events (e.g., venue, food, etc.). In order to be a member, organizations must commit to paying their program participants a minimum wage and supporting the advancement of green careers through job training programs.

Within that structure, the Missouri Botanical Garden's programs offer a particularly welldeveloped example of long term job seeker investment. Training participants might start in the Outdoor Youth Corps (ages 16–20), participating in field trips to college campuses, financial literacy workshops, mock interviews, and professional skill development through hands-on urban conservation work. The Outdoor Leadership Corps is the next step, designed for individuals 18+, and is more work-focused than OYC. MOBOT deliberately designed their program to overlap seasons and enable collaborative work days between the two groups. From there, program graduates are encouraged to join an alumni collective where they have access to paid work days, behind-the-scenes educational tours (e.g. greenhouses, herbariums), and social networking gatherings. MOBOT staff provide ongoing mentorship to alumni via resume editing, letters of reference, and job connections. Through this thoughtfully structured sequencing, training participants can see a clear progression of responsibility, from career exploration to exposure to training to full-time employment.

Staffing and Internal Operations

A program is only as strong as the team that runs it. Effective staffing, whether paid or volunteer, requires having the right people in the right roles at the right ratios and investing in their ongoing development. When first piloting a program, volunteers may be deployed to support a majority of the work, particularly if you're starting small. As your program scales, however, investing in dedicated, paid staff will be helpful to ensure your program runs smoothly and attracts additional investments. Dedicated staff will also contribute to the development of strong internal operations, including using data intentionally and building systems that endure staff turnover.

Role	Description	Typical Ratio / Load
Program Director/ Manager	Responsible for overall program strategy, employer relationships, funder reporting, and team supervision. In smaller programs, may also serve as lead instructor or case manager.	1 per program (or per 3–4 cohorts annually)
Instructor/ Trainer	Delivers occupational and professional skills instruction. Should have both subject matter expertise and adult education competency. Ideally holds relevant industry certifications and has real-world sector experience.	1 per 15–20 participants (classroom); 1 per 10–12 (hands-on)
Career Navigator/ Case Manager	Provides individualized support to participants, addressing barriers to completion and connecting participants to wrap-around services. Serves as the primary relationshipholder for each participant, tracking job openings in real time, coaching participants through the job search, making warm introductions to employer contacts, and following participants into their first jobs to support retention.[15]	1 per 20–25 active participants
Employer Engagement Specialist	Cultivates and maintains employer partnerships, coordinates work experience placements, and manages the job placement pipeline. Should be skilled in relationship sales and comfortable representing the program to business partners.	1 per 50–75 active placements; supports 2–4 employer pipelines
Intake/ Recruitment Coordinator	Manages the participant pipeline from initial outreach through enrollment. Ensures a steady flow of qualified candidates and maintains referral partner relationships.	1 per 2–3 cohorts per year
Data/ Outcomes Staff	Collects and tracks outcome data for funders and for continuous organizational learning. Responsible for using data to improve program processes and for reporting metrics to external audiences.	1 FTE per $1.5–2M program budget (or shared across programs)

Quick Tip: Cross Training & Succession Planning

Many workforce programs, particularly small ones, are operationally dependent on one or two key individuals. This creates organizational fragility. Document key institutional knowledge including employer relationships, curriculum, funder contacts, and intake processes in accessible formats. Cross-train staff across functions where feasible, and create written transition plans for key roles so that a departure does not destabilize the program.

Key Metrics & Outcomes

Outcome measurement is the foundation of program improvement and funder accountability. Strong programs define their metrics at launch, track them consistently, and use data to make real decisions not just to meet reporting requirements. Common metrics include: enrollment, completion rate, credential attainment, placement rate, wage at placement, retention at 30-60-90 days / 6 months / 1 year, and wage progression over time. These should be disaggregated by demographic groups to identify equity gaps within the program's own outcomes. Qualitative feedback through participant surveys and employer satisfaction interviews round out the picture and drive curriculum refinement between cohorts.

Sample Metrics

Core Employment Outcomes	Quality and Retention Outcomes	Systems-Level Indicators
• Enrollment: Number of participants starting each cohort • Program Completion Rate: % of enrolled participants who complete the full program (target: 70–85%+ depending on population served) • Credential Attainment Rate: % of completers earning a target industry credential or certificate • Job Placement Rate: % of completers who secure employment in a target occupation within 90 days of graduation (target: 70–80%+) • Average Starting Wage: Mean hourly or annual wage at time of job placement	• 30/60/90-Day Job Retention: % of placed participants still employed at 30, 60, and 90 days postplacement • 6-Month and 12-Month Retention: Longer-term employment stability (12-month retention of 65–70% is considered strong) • Wage Progression: Change in hourly or annual earnings at 6- and 12-month followup • Participant Satisfaction: Structured end-of-program and post-placement surveys • Employer Satisfaction: Posthire surveys of employer partners at 30 and 90 days	• Cost per completer and cost per placement (important for funder conversations and program efficiency analysis) • Employer partner retention rate year-over-year • Cohort wait time (days from application to program start)

Building a Data Culture

Data is only valuable if staff use it. Build a data culture by incorporating a brief 'data moment' into weekly staff meetings: share one metric, identify what it tells you, and discuss what you might do differently. Avoid making data feel punitive; frame it as a shared learning tool. Consider a simple shared dashboard (even in Excel or Google Sheets) that gives all staff real-time visibility into enrollment, completion, and placement numbers.

Funding

Sustainable workforce development programming requires a diversified funding strategy that blends public and private sources, each with distinct eligibility requirements, restrictions, reporting expectations, and timelines. Over-reliance on any single source creates fragility; strategic diversification creates resilience. Below are typical funding streams you may want to consider for your workforce program.

Public Funding Sources

- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA): This is the primary federal workforce funding stream, administered through state and local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs). WIOA Title I funds adult, dislocated worker, and youth training services. Programs can typically access WIOA funds by working directly with Local WDBs as subcontractors.
- State Workforce Agencies: Many states have discretionary workforce development funding beyond WIOA — including state general fund appropriations, incumbent worker training funds, and sector-specific workforce programs. Eligibility and availability vary significantly by state.
- Community Development Block Grants (CDBG): Federal funds administered by local governments for community development, including workforce training in low-income areas.
- SNAP Employment & Training (SNAP E&T): All states receive federal funding to operate SNAP E&T programs that help participants receiving food and nutrition assistance find work and meet state or local workforce needs. Through SNAP E&T, participants can get help finding a job, train for a new career, or advance in their current field while receiving support such as case management, transportation assistance, childcare, books, and supplies. As your program scales, you might explore tapping into these funds by becoming a state-appointed SNAP E&T provider.
- Department of Corrections / Reentry Funding (Second Chance Act): Many states have specific allocations for pre-release and post-release workforce programming. Programs with justiceinvolved participants should explore these streams at both the state and county level.
- Economic Development Grants: State and local economic development agencies sometimes fund workforce training tied to business attraction, retention, or expansion — particularly when an employer is committed to local hiring.

Private Funding Sources

Philanthropic Funding

- National Foundations: There are several large national funders with explicit workforce development priorities including the JPMorgan Chase Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. These funders typically support programs with strong evidence bases and national or large regional scale.
- Regional and Local Foundations: Community foundations, family foundations, and corporate foundations are often the most accessible philanthropic funding source for local programs.
- Sector-Specific Foundations: Industry associations and sector-focused foundations sometimes fund workforce training aligned to their industry. Healthcare systems, construction industry associations, and technology sector organizations are active in this space.

Corporate and Employer Funding

- Direct Employer Investment: Employers who are deeply engaged as hiring partners may be willing to provide direct financial support — covering costs of training, providing equipment, or sponsoring cohorts in exchange for priority access to graduates.
- Employer Training Fees: Some programs charge employers a fee for customized training, cohort sponsorship, or priority placement access. This model works best when program quality is strong and employer relationships are established.
- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Grants: Many large corporations have CSR or community investment programs that fund workforce development, particularly in communities where they operate.
- Sector Partnerships / Employer Consortia: Groups of employers in a sector can pool resources to co-fund a shared training program, spreading cost while ensuring a sufficient pipeline of trained workers. The Chamber of Commerce or industry associations can be convening partners for this model.
- Community Reinvestment Act (CRA): Banks and credit unions subject to CRA requirements may fund workforce development programs as qualifying community development activities — particularly in low- and moderate-income census tracts. Building relationships with local bank officers can open significant funding opportunities.

Quick Tip

Best-practice programs aim for no single funding source to represent more than 30–40% of total program revenue. A diversified portfolio might include: 40% public workforce funds (WIOA, state), 30% philanthropy (national and local foundations), 15% employer contributions, and 15% fee-for-service revenue.

Navigating Funder Requirements

- Read every grant agreement carefully before signing. Pay particular attention to allowable costs, match requirements, prior approval requirements, and reporting deadlines.
- Assign a specific staff person as the accountable owner for each grant, responsible for tracking deliverables, compiling data, and submitting reports on time.
- Build relationships with your program officers. They are often your best allies when you need a budget modification, timeline extension, or guidance on allowable costs.
- Maintain a clean, audit-ready financial system from the beginning. Even small programs should use accounting software that can produce grant-specific financial reports on demand.

Appendix A: Community Based Organization Green Economy Job Training Program, Sample 12-Week Plan

Program Overview	
Schedule	Monday – Friday, 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM
Format	Hands-on green economy fieldwork each morning; soft skills workshops and classroom instruction each afternoon; Fridays include site visits, weekly review, and job readiness activities
Capstone Project	Weeks 10–12: participants design, execute, and present a real community greening project

Daily Schedule Template — Monday–Thursday

Time	Activity
9:00–9:15 AM	Morning check-in and daily goals
9:15 AM–12:00 PM	Hands-on green economy fieldwork
12:00–1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00–2:30 PM	Technical/classroom instruction (greening theory, safety, certifications)
2:30–2:45 PM	Break
2:45–4:15 PM	Soft skills workshop
4:15–5:00 PM	Reflection, journaling, or job-readiness activity

Daily Schedule Template — Friday

Time	Activity
9:00 AM–12:00 PM	Site visit, guest speaker, or community greening project
12:00–1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00–3:00 PM	Weekly skills review and check-in
3:00–4:30 PM	Job readiness / soft skills deep-dive
4:30–5:00 PM	Weekly wrap-up and feedback

12-Week Curriculum Overview

Wk	Phase	Green Economy Focus	Soft Skills Focus
1	Orientation & Foundations	Safety basics, PPE, tool ID & use	Professionalism, workplace expectations
2	Orientation & Foundations	Soil science, plant ID, planting techniques	Teamwork, active listening, feedback
3	Core Green Economy Skills	Tree planting & care, mulching, watering systems	Time management, prioritization
4	Core Green Economy Skills	Garden bed prep, composting, urban agriculture basics	Problem-solving, adaptability
5	Core Green Economy Skills	Green infrastructure intro (rain gardens, bioswales)	Conflict resolution
6	Specialized Skills	Stormwater management, green roofs/walls	Customer service, community engagement
7	Specialized Skills	Equipment operation & maintenance, basic irrigation	Public speaking & presenting
8	Specialized Skills	Pruning, basic arboriculture, tree risk awareness	Workplace ethics & accountability
9	Certification & Capstone Prep	OSHA 10 prep & exam, First Aid/CPR	Financial literacy basics
10	Certification & Capstone Prep	Capstone site assessment & design	Resume writing & job applications
11	Job Readiness & Transition	Capstone project execution (handson, full days)	Interview skills, mock interviews
12	Job Readiness & Transition	Capstone presentation, certification completion, job placement support	Workplace rights, transition planning

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