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FutureReady States Profile: Illinois





Intro

Despite a ready market for skilled workers and an abundance of related workforce education and training programs, many Illinois residents are stuck in a cycle of jobs that barely pay for their basic needs. Financial struggles, food and housing insecurity, and work and family responsibilities are formidable barriers for low-income adults who seek the skills that are in demand in today's economy, state workforce officials and advocates say.

With tens of thousands of adults in Illinois now facing the loss of some benefits as work requirements for federal assistance programs become more demanding, those challenges are expected to get worse. When the new requirements kicked in this May, state officials estimated 150,000 participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) would lose those food benefits, with many more facing a similar loss of benefits in the coming months. That looming reality

intensified efforts to connect low-income residents to education and training programs that are closely aligned with job openings in burgeoning fields that offer a living wage. In response, state agencies, education institutions, and nonprofit partners joined forces to revamp Illinois' workforce development system so it works better for those who need it most.

Like most states, Illinois sees short-term credential programs aligned to high-demand, high-wage jobs as a vital part of an effective workforce development strategy—one that supports economic growth while quickly moving more residents toward financial independence. Unlike many other states, however, Illinois' education and training strategy is a cornerstone of a broader anti-poverty effort. It taps diverse funding sources and a full slate of support services to address the persistent barriers that can derail opportunities for underserved communities.

Illinois' Challenge

Illinois is responding to a workforce trend playing out nationally: Innovation and a rapidly evolving economy are threatening some traditional job sectors while fueling growth in emerging industries. The resulting gap favors candidates with credentials that deliver the distinct skills and certifications that employers say they need.

Within the next decade, more than seven in 10 jobs in Illinois will require a high-quality degree or credential beyond high school, according to the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University. Just 60 percent of working-age adults now meet that requirement.

Yet there are thousands of current job openings—and many thousands more to come, given the projected growth in high-demand fields such as healthcare, renewable energy, and quantum technology. To meet that need, the state is working to adapt its workforce development infrastructure and coordinate funding to help more workers gain the necessary credentials, especially those imperiled by a shrinking social safety net.

While Illinois has long invested public dollars in short-term credential programs, the state is taking steps to better coordinate its fragmented workforce development system. As part of Lumina Foundation's FutureReady States (FRS) initiative, a coalition of government agencies, higher education institutions, and nonprofits are working together to evaluate existing programs, identify credentials that lead to good-paying

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jobs, and connect students to financial aid programs and support services to help them succeed.

“Many workers need help finding their way from low-level jobs to the kinds of training and career paths that can change the equation for them and their families,” said Christina Warden, vice president of policy and programs at Women Employed, an advocacy organization coordinating the effort. “We need to guide them to programs that will give them a direct line to a better job and make sure we remove as many barriers as possible so they can earn a credential of value.”



Illinois' Approach:

Illinois' FutureReady States approach combines quality short-term credentials, funding supports, and student-focused services to meet the state's workforce goals. Lacking a statewide definition of what constitutes a "credential of value," the FRS approach uses the Illinois Community College Board's Workforce Empowerment Initiative (WEI) as its model. The 7-year-old WEI program provides grants to 20 of the state's 45 community colleges to serve students from underrepresented communities who pursue select training. The resources may be used for tuition, childcare, transportation, and other costs of attendance.

The FRS effort follows the WEI methodology and "value" definition and holds up the student support infrastructure as a key component for helping participants complete employer-aligned training. WEI defines a credential of value as one that opens the door to employment in high-skilled, high-wage, and in-demand occupations and boosts pay to at least 30 percent above a regional living wage, which varies across the state from \$26 to \$35 an hour. The initiative also supports training programs that have an educational pathway that leads to the targeted wage over time.

Adults living in or near poverty often find it burdensome to navigate a vast system of credential programs of varying quality and the federal and state subsidies that can help pay for them. Hundreds of certificates are available through community colleges, for-profit programs, and other training providers, but not all deliver the skills required to land a job in high-growth, high-wage fields. A single parent working a part-time retail job might qualify for tuition assistance through one program, childcare subsidies through another, and transportation support through a third, but have no way to connect the pieces. The result has been persistent under-enrollment in the programs most likely to move people out of poverty and high dropout rates among those who do enroll.

A recent state mandate requires every community college and public university to have a designated "benefits navigator" to guide students through the maze of federal and state resources—including scholarships and financial aid, food pantries, transportation subsidies, and housing assistance. At a time when state and local funding is unstable, and federal dollars are under threat, help in applying for benefits can be crucial to enrollment, advocates say.

Across education and workforce programs, officials are compiling lists of credentials aligned with existing jobs and

working to maximize funding and services that can help more adults enroll in and complete education and training. The state is expanding its SNAP to Success program, Illinois' version of SNAP 50/50, a federal mechanism that reimburses states half of the costs incurred for serving SNAP recipients in qualifying training programs. As new federal work requirements push hundreds of thousands of Illinois adults to document 80 hours of work or training each month to retain their food benefits, the 50/50 reimbursement allows programs to stretch their dollars further.

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Partners in the FRS initiative are also exploring ideas to create a state direct-cash program to boost enrollment and completion in short-term training programs. A state guaranteed income fund would provide funding for low-income adults attending community colleges and short-term credential programs to pay related costs, including those for books, laptops, uniforms—even expenses such as utility bills, and car repairs, or childcare costs that are often barriers to attendance. The approach emulates guaranteed income programs piloted in recent years in several jurisdictions around the state. For example, the Cook County Guaranteed Income Pilot, which provided a \$500 monthly stipend to more than 3,000 families in Chicago and the surrounding area for a two-year period through January 2025, gave participants a greater sense of stability and, in some cases, allowed them to pursue additional job training.

Signs of Progress

Though still in the early stages, state officials say the effort to make education and training programs affordable, accessible, and directly aligned to in-demand jobs is getting more people on the path to economic mobility.

The Workforce Empowerment Initiative has served more than 19,000 adult learners since it launched in 2019, with nearly three-quarters completing the program and landing a job. Those graduates earn an average of \$51,200 a year, an increase of about \$34,000 over participants' pre-enrollment earnings. The return on investment is estimated at \$12 for every \$1 in state WEI funding. While the state has allocated \$18.7 million to sustain current WEI programs for fiscal year 2027, advocates are hoping those results will prompt a bigger state investment to expand the program to more campuses.

Illinois leaders say major issues remain regarding state investments in short-term credentials. Specifically, wage outcomes need to be improved as inflation is driving up living costs and will ultimately redefine a "living wage" in most regions in the state. There is also a need for more consistent input from employers and data to better track the value that credentials convey in the job market.

The FRS coalition also seeks ways around another significant barrier to economic mobility, particularly for women and people of color: too many workers spiral among low-level jobs after earning an initial credential, with little opportunity to advance. While many Illinois employers have expressed interest in workers with specific short-term credentials, in practice, they favor job candidates with college degrees. Too many see short-term programs as a tool to upskill their existing workforce, not as a pipeline for new employees.

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Looking Ahead

Partners in Illinois' FutureReady States initiative have reached a shared conclusion: The systems, programs, and people needed to move more adults into better training and jobs are largely in place. The harder work now is in shifting attitudes, aligning incentives, and scaling up programs that show results.

Employer engagement remains one of the most significant opportunities to realize the promise of Illinois' workforce transformation efforts. While employers increasingly recognize the value of skills-based talent, hiring practices too often default to prioritizing a bachelor's degree. Their applicant-tracking systems often filter out qualified candidates with a short-term, industry-recognized credential that can demonstrate the competencies needed for success before they have the opportunity to be considered.

The City of Chicago has moved to address this in its own workforce through an executive order that prioritizes skills-based hiring across municipal government. The policy encourages hiring decisions based on demonstrated skills, competencies, and relevant experience rather than degree attainment alone, expanding access to quality careers for individuals with valuable workforce credentials.

Replicating that in the private sector, however, requires voluntary employer commitment that is harder to get at scale. That is seen as essential to ensuring that investments

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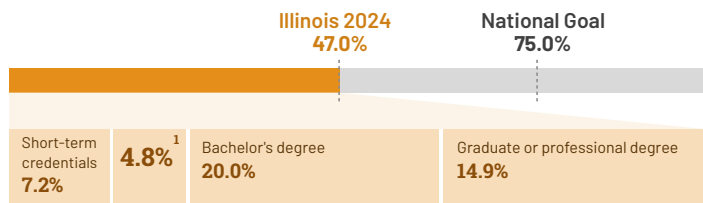
in high-quality credentials translate into meaningful employment and long-term economic mobility.

“There is a prevailing narrative that the workforce puzzle is too big a problem and there is no solution,” said Warden. “But we’ve seen through our collective effort a lot of progress and learned that with continued momentum, tens of thousands more people in Illinois can prosper from our changing economy.”

Illinois Snapshot

Credentials of Value Share in Illinois

Among 5.4m people ages 25–64 in the labor force



¹ Associate degree: 4.8%

Measured as the share of the labor force with a post-high school degree, certification, or certificate and are making at least 15% more than the national median annual salary of a high school graduate. Source: Lumina Foundation's A Stronger Nation, 2025

Definition of Credentials of Value:

There is not an official statewide definition of credentials of value, but FRS partners are using the state's Workforce Empowerment Initiative (WEI) as the standard. WEI defines a credential of value as a certificate earned through academic and job training programs that qualifies the recipient for a job in an in-demand occupation that pays 30 percent above the regional living wage.

Core Partners/Collaborators in State Short-Term Credential Efforts

- Women Employed
- Workforce Empowerment Initiative
- Illinois Community College Board
- Illinois Central College
- Economic Security Illinois
- Illinois Board of Higher Education
- City of Chicago, Office of the Mayor
- Young Invincibles
- National Able Network
- Chicago Jobs Council
- Early-childhood workforce advocate

Priority or Emerging Industry Sectors

Advanced manufacturing; next-generation agriculture; life sciences; transportation, distribution, and logistics; quantum computing, AI, and microelectronics; clean energy production and manufacturing

Building Healthcare Career Pathways

Illinois partners in the FutureReady States initiative are wrestling with a question that has flummoxed many states: Should occupations that require training and are essential to the economy but do not yield a living wage—such as childcare workers and certified nursing assistants—qualify for financial aid and other state investment?

In hospitals across Chicago, thousands of entry-level healthcare professionals tend to the day-to-day needs of patients and support other staff, often under demanding conditions for minimal pay. While roles such as certified nursing assistant (CNA), patient care technician, and medical assistant offer an entry point into the field for workers with little formal education beyond high school, these jobs rarely provide a clear pathway to higher-level healthcare positions.

Stagnation in those jobs, which are disproportionately held by women and people of color, is all too common, advocates say. The pathway from CNA to roles such as surgical or imaging technicians or registered nurses isn't well-defined, and the process can be lengthy and costly. Also, a confusing system of credentials, hiring criteria, and bureaucratic processes makes career pathways unclear and difficult to navigate.

While employers are eager to fill positions plagued by persistent shortages of talent, they often lack the programs

and structures that support the advancement of their current workers. Some hospitals in the city are now looking to help more workers earn the credentials needed to climb the ladder and earn better pay. Through the Healthcare Upskilling Initiative created by Women Employed, two Chicago hospitals are sponsoring on-site upskilling programs that prepare CNAs and other lower-tier employees for higher-skilled roles.

The initiative—launched in one hospital in 2025 and another expected to launch this year with funding from the hospitals and private philanthropy—provides preparatory coursework and supports training toward a credential. The participating hospitals promise successful candidates a promotion to jobs paying more than \$50,000 a year.

"These employers recognize they have some amazing staff with the potential and ambition to move into higher-level roles but don't know how to connect them to the available training they need," said Christina Warden, vice president of policy and programs at Women Employed, a Chicago-based nonprofit that works to improve economic opportunities and workplace equity for women. "By helping them tie together the relevant education programs with their internal professional development and promotion structure, we can help get more staff members on a positive career path and fill the hospital's workforce needs."

FutureReady States – Priorities

The FutureReady States initiative is a key element of Lumina Foundation's bold new goal: by 2040, 75 percent of U.S. adults in the labor market will have a degree or other credential of value leading to economic prosperity. The FutureReady States — Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia — are receiving technical support to develop shared strategies and measurable goals to ensure that short-term credential programs deliver positive outcomes for learners and employers. The FutureReady States are taking a customized approach focused on three general priorities:

- Conducting a landscape analysis of short-term education and training opportunities and the various funding sources for institutions and learners.
- Identifying opportunities for strengthening pathways, such as defining “stackability” and creating more seamless alignment between degree and non-degree programs.
- Developing strategies to improve the return on investment for short-term credential programs, such as defining standards for credentials of value, building out data systems, and tracking job and wage earnings for specific credentials.

Lumina Foundation 2040 Goal – A Stronger Nation

In a changing world, education is more important than ever. Lumina Foundation believes that higher education should be a tool for opportunity, helping people create a better, more prosperous future for themselves and their families. That's why Lumina has set a bold new goal: By 2040, 75 percent of adults in the U.S. labor force will have college degrees or other credentials of value leading to economic prosperity.

To do so will require helping a greater proportion of the adult population to tap into the many education and training

options available beyond high school. Short-term credentials are an essential part of that equation, but they must reflect high-quality preparation and demonstrate a direct link to good jobs and better wages.

Nearly three dozen states are funding 111 active initiatives for improving the short-term credential ecosystem, at a total of \$8.1 billion, according to the latest data compiled by HCM Strategists with funding from Lumina. That's up from last year's total of 70 initiatives in 32 states totaling \$5.6 billion.



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