



Funding Resilience

How public policies can support businesses in upskilling workers for a changing economy

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NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION
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Employer-based upskilling: An effective strategy for today's economy

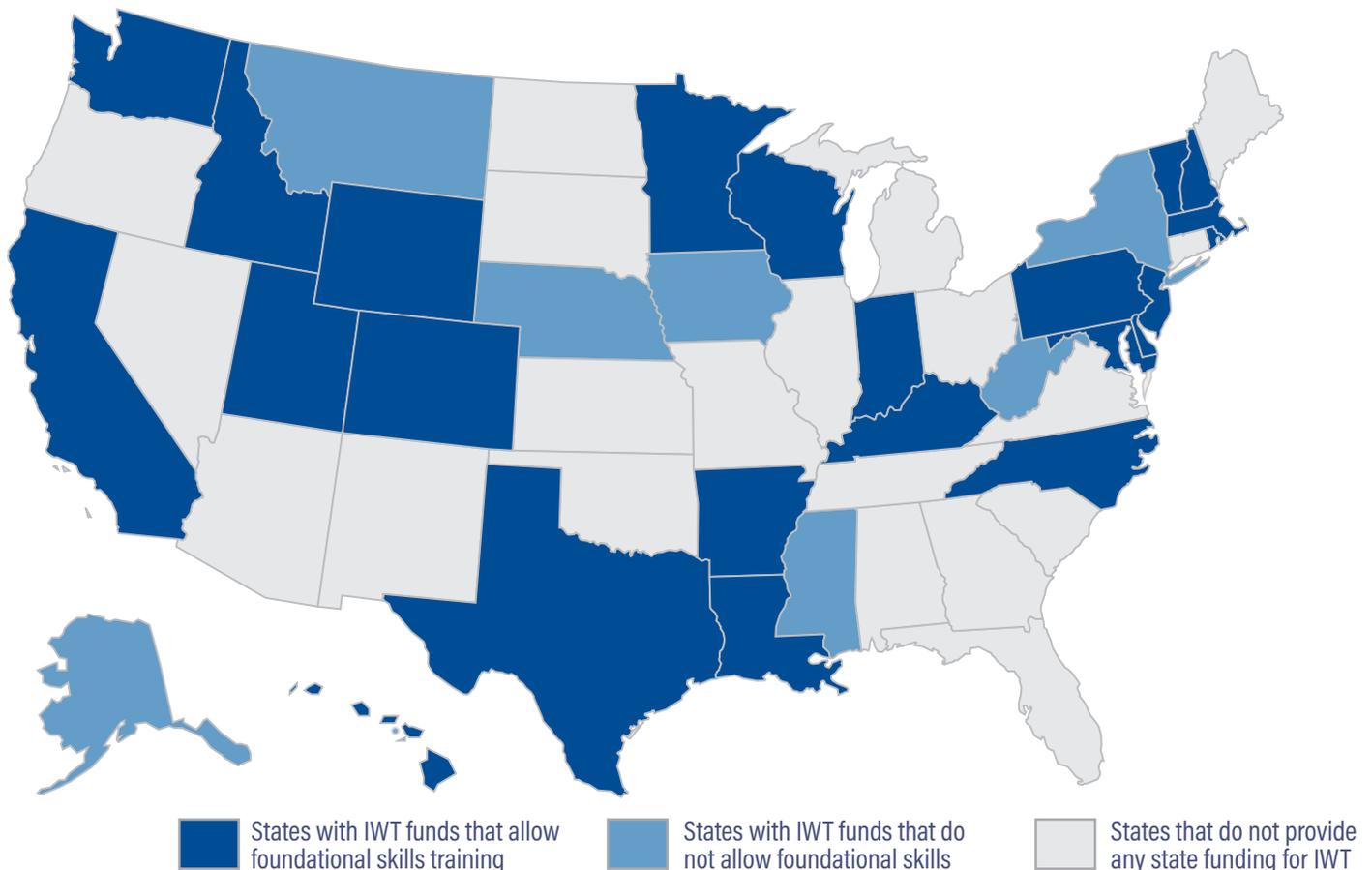
The COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted and accelerated two trends that were already occurring in the American workplace: First, the demand for **new skills and competencies**, including digital skills, from workers at every level! Second, the growing importance of investing in **upskilling strategies** that can help two groups of workers: Those who are already employed and are adapting to changing skill needs on the job, and new jobseekers who are preparing for employment at a particular company.

Everyone has a stake in these processes succeeding: Workers themselves; the businesses that employ them; the education and workforce providers that serve them; and the policymakers whose job it is to navigate the American economy through the shoals of a recession and into a strong recovery.

But even before the pandemic, the US was not investing nearly enough in proven strategies to help incumbent workers upskill and new workers enter jobs. Only thirty states provide **any** dedicated state funds for incumbent-worker training -- and among the states that do, funding is not enough to reach even a fraction of potentially eligible workers. **See map.**

Now, as the American economy continues its roller-coaster ride and workers face the highest unemployment rate in generations, there is fresh urgency to act. Luckily, there are demonstrated examples of what to do: Employer-based upskilling programs that have thrived by connecting eager workers with demand-driven training that leads to career advancement.

State incumbent worker training funds provide crucial but uneven support for upskilling



To date, however, these programs have been isolated bright spots. Some are funded through modest allocations from state incumbent worker training (IWT) funds, while others exist precariously, dependent on a cobbled-together array of in-house corporate resources and other inconsistent funding sources. Moving to a more broad-based, sustained implementation of this model will require significantly strengthening public policies and accompanying investments.

This brief details the current landscape for businesses' in-house upskilling policies and explains the major bottlenecks and barriers preventing widespread replication of effective practices. Next, it makes recommendations for how policymakers can take action to change the trajectory and equip more businesses to implement upskilling programs that respond to current and emerging labor market demands, including the need for rapid re-hiring and re-skilling as previously unemployed workers return to the labor market.

To preview this brief's conclusion: **States with existing IWT policies should strengthen them, and those without such policies should advance them.** As outlined below, these policies can be vital tools in driving greater employer investment in workforce training and advancing more workers along career paths, yet restrictions in their current design leave many workers and businesses out in the cold. Reinvigorating state IWT policies is necessary to ensure that the essential workers and industries that the United States depends on can flourish in a post-pandemic economy. Enthusiastic advocacy from businesses and workers – combined with the growing public recognition that existing workforce investments are simply not sufficient for the present moment – can provide the momentum necessary to galvanize policymakers to act.

*To learn more about NSC's recommendations for federal policies in this area, please see **It's Incumbent on U.S.***

Defining 'employer-based upskilling'

Employer-based upskilling (EBU) refers to:

- Training that equips people with in-demand skills so they can advance in their careers and earn higher wages;
- That includes opportunities for frontline workers to build technical skills, as well as foundational skills (reading, math, spoken English, digital literacy) if needed;
- Is offered at a workplace and/or with the support (financial, logistical, or other investment) by a business or group of businesses; and
- Focuses on incumbent workers and/or people re-entering the workforce who require training to begin or continue in employment at their company.

Ideally, upskilling programs should also **pay** workers for the time spent in training (either as additional hours or as paid release time from their regularly scheduled hours), and commit to specified career advancement (promotion, wage increase, etc.) for workers who complete training, demonstrate skill gains, or obtain a credential.



While businesses play a crucial role in worker upskilling, **they cannot and should not have to shoulder the full responsibility for doing so.**

Why do investments in worker upskilling need to happen now?

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that workers without bachelor's degrees form the backbone of our economy. Millions of these workers are employed in *dozens of essential occupations* across industries from public health and public safety to energy, transportation, agriculture, and more. Many have continued working during the pandemic at great personal risk to their own health and safety, while others have lost employment as the continuing effects of the pandemic and recession ripple across the US economy.

At the same time, business operations are transforming radically as large and small companies alike adapt to the realities of a pandemic-affected world. Job responsibilities and day-to-day operations in many industries already look quite different, and as new public health information continues to emerge, practices will likely continue to shift.

Many of the industries undergoing rapid change have high numbers of workers with foundational skill needs, including digital literacy needs.² Even as home health aides, allied health professionals, logistics workers, and others race to familiarize themselves with mobile apps and other digital tools newly required in their jobs, both they and their employers are facing hidden costs associated with those skill gaps. For businesses to flourish, they will need to ensure all members of their workforce have the training and development they need to contribute to their fullest potential.

Despite frontline workers' myriad contributions, many businesses continue to under-invest in training for these workers compared to their more-educated peers.³ Those employers that **do** seek to invest in upskilling face numerous barriers to accessing the sparse public funds that could amplify their impact. As the US recovers from economic crisis, we need policies that encourage greater employer investment in upskilling frontline workers, not less.

Indeed, while businesses play a crucial role in worker upskilling, they cannot and should not have to shoulder the full responsibility for doing so. Companies are already scrambling to navigate a turbulent economy, leaving limited time and financial resources to singlehandedly launch new in-house upskilling strategies. Small and mid-sized employers (SMEs) and industries with a relatively flat hiring pyramid are particularly challenged, either because



There are more than 48 million workers with foundational skills gaps in the US. Such gaps serve as an invisible drag on productivity, hampering both business economic competitiveness and workers' own economic mobility.

their small staff means they have limited in-house human resources expertise, or because there are relatively few opportunities for frontline workers to advance within their industry (as opposed to upskilling into an adjacent industry).

Policymakers also bear important responsibility for enacting better solutions, because public policies have helped create today's challenges. For example, public policies that have historically underinvested in K-12 education and postsecondary skills training are partially responsible for why today's workers may lack skills. In addition, workforce policy incentives that are overly complex and burdensome for small and mid-sized employers have limited the implementation of upskilling policies by such companies. And other policy barriers have made it difficult for employers of all sizes to effectively and efficiently access public funds to amplify their upskilling efforts.

Small business: A crucial engine in need of fuel

Small and mid-sized businesses are a vital component of the US economy. Pre-pandemic, these entities employed 48 percent of the US workforce.⁴ Since the pandemic, small businesses have experienced severe economic shocks, varying somewhat depending on their industry and other factors, which have caused them to lay off workers and scale back other investments.⁵ The effects have been particularly severe for small businesses owners of color, who collectively employed more than 8.7 million workers before the recession.⁶

As these vital businesses work to regroup and rebuild, policymakers should take action to support their ability to maintain and upskill their workforce, particularly in terms of helping their employees adapt to newly emerging skill needs.

A key contextual factor is the constrained resource environment that many small and mid-sized enterprises (SMEs) were acting within even before the pandemic. While some very large companies

have a position known as a Chief Learning Officer, many SMEs lack even a full-time human resources administrator, to say nothing of a role dedicated to learning and upskilling. Given this limited staffing, as well as the numerous competing resource demands of running a small business, many companies are unable to singlehandedly launch an incumbent worker upskilling initiative.

This leaves businesses vulnerable to higher turnover costs, as workers leave for other jobs in which they can find upskilling and advancement opportunities. Data show that employers, particularly SMEs, do indeed face significant costs due to high turnover rates in many entry-level roles, a phenomenon known as churn.⁷

Policymakers can equip small business owners to meet these challenges by investing in proven employer-based upskilling models through state incumbent worker training funds and related mechanisms.

Policymakers should be mindful that one of the most reliable pathways to economic security and career advancement is to participate in upskilling that occurs in the context of real-world employment, and reflects businesses' actual workforce needs and workers' actual career aspirations.

Good policies should recognize that many workers are quick to capitalize on opportunities to grow into new responsibilities, advance their careers, and increase earnings while staying with their current employer. This is especially true with regard to frontline workers, including those with foundational skills gaps in literacy, numeracy, spoken English or digital skills. There are more than 48 million such workers in the US, and their skill gaps serve as an invisible drag on productivity, hampering both business economic competitiveness and workers' own economic mobility.⁸ The costs of these skill gaps are significant, as workers develop sometimes-elaborate and time-consuming coping mechanisms to cover for their lack of skills.⁹

To that end, skills advocates and policymakers should be mindful that one of the most reliable pathways to economic security and career advancement is to participate in upskilling that occurs ***in the context of real-world employment***, and reflects businesses' actual workforce needs and workers' actual career aspirations. In addition, workers who lack foundational skills benefit most from contextualized upskilling approaches that blend foundational and technical skills.



What makes employer-based upskilling the right policy approach for today's challenges?

The value proposition of employer-based upskilling approaches is straightforward: Workers gain because they get much-desired opportunities for career advancement and higher earnings. Employers gain because they successfully leverage their existing employees' talent to meet critical workforce needs.

In addition, businesses that invest meaningfully in upskilling can also benefit from becoming "employers of choice" that have an advantage over their competitors when recruiting new hires. Indeed, data has repeatedly shown that workers value training and prefer working for employers who offer clear, well-defined pathways to advancement.¹⁰

Prior to the pandemic, some individual businesses were already addressing talent mismatches and gaps by creating grow-your-own talent development strategies, especially in situations where rapid industry transformation, geographic location, or other factors limited their ability to hire from outside. These employers' actions reflected an understanding that businesses themselves are perfectly positioned to identify the training that is most relevant to their workforce needs. Thus, leveraging their **existing** employees' institutional knowledge and experience – and equipping those workers with the skills they need to advance to a new position – can be the most cost-effective way to meet their talent pipeline needs.

Upskilling as a Racial Equity Strategy

As noted above, public policy decisions have helped to cause adult workers' skill gaps in the first place, and thus better policies are necessary to help remedy the gaps. This is especially true for workers of color, who face inequities in access to high-quality education, well-paying jobs, and apprenticeship and work-based learning opportunities, among others. These workers also face other overarching issues that can hinder access to skill-building, such as the racial wealth gap.¹¹

Workers of color have been particularly affected by the COVID pandemic and recession, with those employed in essential roles facing public health risks as well as economic ones.¹² A handful of workforce training providers have launched new initiatives specifically aimed at upskilling these frontline workers during the pandemic, such as Building Skills Partnership's *Infectious Disease Certification Program* and the Los Angeles Hospitality Training Academy's *various online courses* for culinary and hotel workers.

However, these examples are in the minority. Overall, workers of color continue to face significant barriers to accessing workforce development opportunities. These are magnified in a pandemic-affected world by digital inclusion barriers, which can prevent workers of color from accessing upskilling opportunities because of lack of home broadband access, lack of digital devices, and/or lack of digital literacy skills.¹³

Policymakers can improve racial equity in workforce development by investing in upskilling and re-skilling strategies that are intentionally inclusive of people of color, such as incumbent worker training policies targeted at industries that employ high numbers of people of color. For example, interventions that can be effective in the retail and retail-adjacent sectors are further explored in *Advancing Frontline Employees of Color*, a publication from PolicyLink and FSG.



New public policies should invest in workers to support businesses' economic recovery

As the US economy navigates toward an inclusive recovery, policymakers have a powerful opportunity to invest in businesses' regrowth through employer-based upskilling – specifically, incumbent worker training policies. The existing landscape of limited, fragmented, and under-funded public workforce policies means that even before the pandemic, businesses often struggled to identify how they might pay for and implement effective upskilling initiatives. This issue is especially acute for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), for which it is often economically inefficient to build their own training programs from scratch. (See text box, page 4.)

The absence of a comprehensive, coordinated public policy for upskilling incumbent workers also makes it hard for companies that are new to the upskilling approach to identify existing good practices and learn from their peers. Finally, the dearth of policy frameworks makes it more difficult to codify and institutionalize good practices across companies.

Those workforce policies that **do** exist are drastically under-resourced. The primary type of policy used to support employer-based upskilling programs, incumbent worker training (IWT), reaches only a

small fraction of American workers, and even fewer among the subset of frontline workers who have foundational skills gaps. In particular, federally funded incumbent worker upskilling programs under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) reach just 1,500 workers per year.¹⁴

State-funded efforts are highly variable; while thirty states offer some support for incumbent worker training, most have very modest budgets, typically less than \$3 million annually.¹⁵ Toward the lower end of the scale are programs such as New Hampshire's Work Ready NH, funded at \$900,000 per year, and Rhode Island's Incumbent Worker Training, at \$550,000. At the other end, California is an extreme outlier, with \$110 million appropriated to its Employment Training Panel each year. Louisiana's Incumbent Worker Training Program is the second-largest, at \$25 million in state funding each year, and Texas' Skills Development Fund for Employers program is close behind with just under \$24 million in funding. Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Maryland follow in size.¹⁶

However, none of these programs currently has the capacity to serve more than a small percentage of US workers. As the US continues to navigate through the pandemic and its associated economic effects, states should prioritize IWT policies as an effective tool to reach more workers and firms.

Digital Literacy: Workforce policy hasn't kept up with new demands

Although the COVID pandemic has dramatically increased digital skill demands on many workers, current workforce policies provide almost no support for building digital literacy. Federal policy simply lists digital literacy as one of numerous "allowable activities" for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Title II adult education programs, and only a handful of states have made specific investments in digital skill-building for adults.

Yet such investments are badly needed. Data show that nearly one-third (31 percent) of American workers have limited or no digital skills.¹⁷ Technological change means that even entry-level positions are becoming more demanding and sophisticated, requiring workers to have more in-depth digital and other skills in order to do their jobs properly.

For example, as the greenhouse industry shifts to precision agriculture, workers are increasingly required to monitor sensors and other technological tools. Home health aides must familiarize themselves with tablet computers to update patient information. And manufacturing workers must be prepared to use augmented reality tools to assemble parts. Across industries, businesses' adoption of automation and digital tools have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and digital skill demands are expected to continue to increase.¹⁸

Policymakers can tackle this issue by ensuring that digital literacy is an allowable activity under state incumbent worker training policies, and by encouraging businesses and education and workforce development providers to incorporate occupational digital literacy into their upskilling initiatives.¹⁹



States should strengthen (or enact) incumbent worker training policies that are broad-based, responsive to industry needs, and contain accountability measures to ensure worker advancement.

How can policy barriers be overcome?

Workforce training providers and small businesses have identified²⁰ three major barriers preventing more employers from taking advantage of IWT policies to build in-house upskilling programs: Inadequate funding, restrictive eligibility requirements, and over-reliance on business and worker cash outlays. Each barrier and its recommended policy solutions are outlined in more detail below. The overarching message: States should strengthen (or enact) incumbent worker training policies that are broad-based, responsive to industry needs, and contain accountability measures to ensure worker advancement.

Streamlining application processes and eliminating unnecessary restrictions

As illustrated above, thirty states provide some type of incumbent worker training funds. (These funds are distinct from the federal WIOA funds, which are available in every state and can be used for incumbent worker training to a very limited extent.) Of those states, twenty-two explicitly allow those funds to be used for foundational skills such as math, English, or digital literacy.²¹

In general, workforce providers and advocates interviewed for this report voiced numerous concerns about the often confusing and complex processes required for businesses to access those funds. They shared repeated examples of how the tight restrictions governing upskilling funds made it difficult or impossible for businesses to make use of available money.

These included mundane rules such as limited time windows for accessing funds (annual or semi-annual application periods are not helpful given the speed of business) or limitations on the **type** of industry eligible to access funds (several informants noted that policymakers often gravitate to larger, more recognizable industries such as manufacturing even if other industries play equally important roles in their local economy). Concerningly, these restrictions sometimes meant that available funds for incumbent worker training went unused.

In the cases where states got this **right**, informants often pointed to a highly qualified technical assistance provider – either an intermediary organization such as the Commonwealth Corporation in Massachusetts, or dedicated staff within a state or local agency that acted as cheerleaders for the program by raising its public profile, helping identify employers who would be good candidates, and helping them to successfully navigate the application and implementation processes.

State policymakers should address these challenges by taking the following steps:

- **Reconsider restrictions (both real and perceived) on state incumbent worker training funds.** While each state has its own rules and regulations for using IWT funds, a common issue across multiple states is a relative lack of awareness or ease in using funds to upskill frontline workers, especially those with foundational skills gaps. States can tackle this issue by clarifying and disseminating information to employers

about how their funds can be used for such purposes, as well as considering whether changes need to be made to existing policy guidance to ensure equitable access for frontline workers. For example:

- **Expand or clarify scope of funds to include foundational skills.** Some states do not currently allow incumbent worker training funds to be used for foundational skills classes such as literacy, numeracy, spoken English, or digital skills. States should reconsider these exclusions and identify ways to reconfigure their incumbent worker programs to incorporate support for foundational skills, such as by funding Integrated Education and Training program models. (See below for more on IET.)
- **When setting wage thresholds for employers to access state training funds, focus on workers' wages at the conclusion** of training rather than the beginning. For example, a state may wish to require that employers receive such funds only for workers earning at least \$X per hour. But the policy may be more effective in helping frontline workers to upskill if it instead requires that workers be earning at least \$X per hour by the time they conclude the training.
- **Ensure that technical assistance is available to assist businesses that are interested in upskilling their workers.** Providing technical assistance ensures that companies can quickly and easily navigate the various public policies designed to help them upskill their workers. Assistance is especially important for small and mid-sized enterprises that may not have dedicated human resources staff or the bandwidth to sift through complex program requirements and paperwork. Technical assistance can be provided by state agency staff, or by local workforce centers, or by intermediary organizations such as industry sector partnerships, depending on state capacity and business needs. A key responsibility of any technical assistance provider should be to develop or strengthen the state's process for identifying businesses that do not currently invest in upskilling but are strong candidates to do so.²²

- **Pave the high road by making it more financially attractive for employers to design high-quality upskilling programs.** States can incentivize businesses by providing a higher IWT funds match percentage or allocating greater points in the application-review process for companies that follow best practices. For example, companies could gain additional points if they provided paid release time for employees to participate in upskilling, or if they directly tied employees' skill gains to promotions or wage gains.

Remedying inadequate funding

State IWT policies are under-funded, and many have faced sizeable cuts in recent years. Setting aside dedicated funding for the upskilling of frontline workers, including those who have foundational skill gaps, is a vital tool in ensuring that upskilling programs actually reach these workers and do not leave them behind. Policymakers can benefit from the fact that some program models with success in upskilling these workers have already been well documented, but never funded at scale. Investing in these models will allow substantially more workers to be served. (For more on how *federal* policymakers can invest in incumbent worker training, see NSC's recent publication *It's Incumbent on U.S.*

State policymakers should:

- **Establish incumbent worker training funds.** As illustrated in the map earlier in this report, twenty states currently lack incumbent worker training funds. Policymakers in those states should establish such funds, ideally with a permanent funding mechanism to ensure sustainability over time. Existing state IWTs are primarily funded through state general funds, an Unemployment Insurance (UI) surcharge, UI Trust Fund interest, or an employer tax.²³
- **Allocate additional dollars to existing state incumbent worker training funds.** In the thirty states where IWTs already exist, many are severely under-resourced. Allocating additional resources is crucial to ensure that IWTs can help local businesses build resilience and help their workforce adapt to a changing economy. However, in a tight budget environment, this may present a challenge. Policymakers should meet this challenge head-on by identifying creative

sources for funds – such as fines or fees levied against offenders by the state attorney general’s office²⁴ – and analyzing how the Return on Investment (ROI) of upskilling programs can be documented to make the case for greater IWT investment.

- **Fund and support workplace-based Integrated Education and Training approaches.** A robust base of research has shown that Integrated Education and Training models such as *I-BEST* are effective in providing an accelerated way for workers to build foundational skills while also training for a specific occupation or industry.²⁵ States should support and expand IET models that are specifically focused on partnering with employers to provide upskilling in the workplace, such as the *I-BEST at Work model* currently being implemented in Kansas, Rhode Island, and Washington State. This can be done using IWT funds or other adult education, anti-poverty, or workforce development funds.
- **Identify opportunities to use federal funding to incentivize employer-based upskilling initiatives.** For example, states can use WIOA Governor’s Reserve funds to support short-term pilots of promising efforts. Two examples are Washington State’s *Upskill/Backfill Initiative*, which supported employers who sought to upskill frontline workers into middle-skill jobs, thus freeing up their original jobs for new entry-level workers; and the *Maryland Business Works* program, which supported a range of upskilling efforts for incumbent workers. In both states, businesses themselves also invested resources alongside public funds.

Reducing reliance on business and worker cash outlays

Incumbent worker upskilling policies often require businesses to outlay cash in order to run the program, only to receive reimbursement or a tax credit months or even a year later. This generally disadvantages SMEs, who often have tight cash flow restrictions, and also discourages those SMEs that have limited tax liability to begin with. Similarly, workers who are eager to participate in upskilling programs may be unable to do so if they cannot afford ancillary costs related to participation, such as additional childcare during class hours or transportation to a learning location.

To address this barrier, state policymakers should:

- **Invest in matching grant programs for employers that invest in frontline workers.** States can provide matching funds to encourage businesses to provide upskilling opportunities for frontline workers. These funds can be structured for employer matching to take the form of in-kind or other meaningful contributions rather than additional cash outlays.
- **Establish mechanisms to support workers in taking advantage of employer-based upskilling opportunities.** Research indicates that even companies that *do* offer upskilling opportunities often see low uptake among their workers, for a variety of reasons.²⁶ Among these are lack of access to supportive services such as childcare and transportation that enable participation in upskilling, and limited cash flow to respond to one-time or emergency costs related to training programs (such as materials or workboots). States can establish a mini-grant program or rolling loan fund to offer grants or short-term no-interest loans to workers in such situations. Minnesota’s publicly administered Nursing Facility Employee Scholarship Program and the accompanying philanthropically-seeded Health Training Scholarship Fund is an example of one policy that supports workers who want to upskill. To incentivize higher quality programs, states should also consider how their loan funds can be structured to encourage employers to follow upskilling best practices such as paid release time and tying skill gains to promotion or wage increases.



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Endnotes

- 1 The pandemic has added new complexity to workers' and businesses' efforts to anticipate and adjust to labor market changes. Digital literacy skills have emerged as a vital component of employability in many occupations, including frontline roles that have not been traditionally thought of as requiring technological skill. Learn more in *The New Landscape of Digital Literacy* (National Skills Coalition, 2020).
- 2 *Foundational Skills in the Service Sector*, National Skills Coalition, 2017, and *The New Landscape of Digital Literacy*, National Skills Coalition, 2020.
- 3 Anthony P. Carnevale, Jeff Strohl, and Artem Gulish, *College Is Just the Beginning: Employers' Role in the \$1.1 Trillion Postsecondary Education and Training System*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015.
- 4 See <https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/advocacy/2018-Small-Business-Profiles-US.pdf>
- 5 US Census Small Business Pulse Survey results: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/05/new-small-business-pulse-survey-shows-breadth-of-covid-19-impact-on-businesses.html>
- 6 For more on these issues, see: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/covid-19s-effect-on-minority-owned-small-businesses-in-the-united-states#>
- 7 For more on the causes of job turnover in the US, see: <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/106912/turning-around-your-turnover-problem.aspx> and <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/CostofTurnover.pdf>
- 8 *Foundational Skills in the Service Sector*, National Skills Coalition, 2017 and *The New Landscape of Digital Literacy*, National Skills Coalition, 2020.
- 9 Qualitative interviews conducted by National Skills Coalition shed light on what these coping mechanisms include. Workers must repeatedly rely on colleagues to assist them, bring work home to request help from family members, and spend substantial extra time compensating for or attempting to hide their skill gaps.
- 10 See <https://hbr.org/2017/12/how-to-improve-the-engagement-and-retention-of-young-hourly-workers>
- 11 *The Roadmap for Racial Equity: An imperative for workforce development advocates*, National Skills Coalition, 2019.
- 12 See: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2020/04/14/483125/economic-fallout-coronavirus-people-color/>
- 13 *Applying a Racial Equity Lens to Digital Literacy*, National Skills Coalition, 2020.
- 14 WIOA Program Year 2018 Data Book, available at: https://www.doleta.gov/performance/results/WIASRD/PY2018/PY_2018_WIOA_and_Wagner-Peyser_Data_Book.pdf
- 15 Unpublished analysis by Meegan Dugan Bassett, National Skills Coalition, 2019. These numbers are slightly complicated by the fact that information on budget size was unavailable for some states despite repeated efforts.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *The New Landscape of Digital Literacy*, National Skills Coalition, 2020.
- 18 Learn more: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/mpp_2017nov15_digitalization_full_report.pdf
- 19 For more on how policymakers can support digital literacy, see *Digital Skills for an Equitable Recovery*, National Skills Coalition, 2020.
- 20 As part of this project, National Skills Coalition conducted key informant interviews with stakeholders to better understand the current landscape and potential opportunities for improved policies in support of incumbent worker training.
- 21 In addition, every state receives funds under Title II of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to support adult education, including foundational skills. However, those funds are not the focus of this report because they are not focused on incumbent workers, do not require employer match or participation, and originate at the federal rather than the state level. While a very small percentage of WIOA Title II funds are in fact used for incumbent worker upskilling, that is not the focus of the program.
- 22 One metric suggested by key informants is to measure the degree to which a business has formalized its perception of workers as assets to be developed rather than costs to be minimized. For example, companies that evaluate managers based on their success in supporting the development and advancement of entry-level staff.
- 23 For example, in some states, a small additional tax such as 0.1 percent is charged to employers for each employee based on taxable wages. That funding may then go into a fund which is used to pay for training and other services. In some states using a UI offset, the state reduces UI taxes by the same or larger amount, then levies a new tax to collect funds for training. In other states UI penalties or an entirely separate employer tax may be used.
- 24 Precedent for this solution comes from a 2017 effort in the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office, which used \$90,000 received through a settlement with an offending construction company to fund an Equal Opportunity in Public Trades Grant.
- 25 For details, see <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/basic-education-for-adults/beda-research.aspx>
- 26 *Developing America's Frontline Workers* (Institute for Corporate Productivity and Aspen Institute, 2016.)

Appendix: State-funded Incumbent Worker Training Programs

Please note: Information for this scan was gathered in 2019 and reflects the most complete information available at the time. More detail about these programs is available via the websites listed for each state.

State	Program name	State agency	Annual funding*	Description	Includes foundational skills?	Website
Alaska	State Training and Employment Program (STEP)	Department of Labor and Workforce Development	\$5 million	STEP grants are available to for-profits, nonprofits, educators, and industry trainers to enhance skills needed by industries. They are used both for existing and new businesses. The goal is to help workers develop new skills to be retained or hired, and ideally to increase their income. Basic or soft skills are not eligible.	No	http://labor.alaska.gov/dets/step.htm#
Arkansas	Workforce Training Grants or Skills Development Grants	Office of Skills Development, Department of Commerce	Unavailable	Office of Skills Development (OSD) Grants support development of the Arkansas workforce by strategically investing in training programs that are prioritized by employer needs and economic impact. Business, post-secondary institutions, and associations are eligible to apply. Grant funds are matching funds, paid as post-training reimbursements upon receipt of supporting documentation. Grants are available to support trainings according to the OSD Grants Rules and Regulations that fall into the four categories: Grow Our Own, Customized Technical, Professional Development, and Skills Gap.	Yes, if job specific	https://arcareereducation.org/about/skills-development/skills-development-grants
California	Employment Training Panel	Employment Training Panel	\$110 million	The Employment Training Panel (ETP) provides funding to employers to assist in upgrading the skills of their workers through training that leads to good paying, long-term jobs. ETP is a funding agency, not a training agency. Businesses determine their own training needs and how to provide training. ETP staff is available to assist in applying for funds and other aspects of participation.	Yes	https://etp.ca.gov/
Colorado	Existing Industry Customized Job Training Funds (recently renamed Skills Advance Colorado)	Office of Economic Development and International Trade and Colorado Community College System	\$4.5 million	The Existing Industry (EI) program focuses on providing assistance to established Colorado companies in order to remain competitive within their industry, adapt to new technology, and prevent layoffs. Training must be customized to training needs of the company but also transferrable. Basic skills may be covered in the context of specific job needs.	Yes, if customized to job competencies	https://internal.cccs.edu/academic-affairs/training-funds/cfei-customized-job-training-fact-sheet/
Delaware	Blue Collar Training Packet or Blue Collar Job Training Fund	Secretary of State, DSB/Division of Small Business	\$100,000 for state employees; additional funds for other workers	The Blue Collar Training Program uses a portion of its funding to help the State of Delaware offer customized training programs to upgrade and retrain state employees. The State of Delaware is awarded funds for workforce development to foster career development and promotional potential for State employees, typically in lower pay grades. (Additional funding through this program is available for the upskilling of Delaware residents who are not state employees; however, this funding does not appear to connect directly with employers to reach incumbent workers.)	Yes	https://dhr.delaware.gov/training/special/blue/
Hawaii	Employment and Training Fund Micro Program	Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, Workforce Development Division		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employers that participate in the ETF Micro Program can obtain training subsidies. ETF will subsidize 50% of tuition cost up to an ETF cap of \$400 per course; any excess balance is paid by the employer. As a participant of the ETF Program, the employer must notify WDD staff of any cancellations or substitutions at least one week prior to the start of the class. Participants must be currently employed by a non-government entity. Requested training must be ETF-approved, upgrading the skills of the participant's current position, and provided by one of the providers on the list of approved ETF Training Providers and ETF cannot be used to fund training that supplants or duplicates existing training activities (e.g., in-house-training) or training that is required by federal, state or county statutes. 	Yes, if part of other training	http://labor.hawaii.gov/wdd/home/employers/etf/micro/

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Idaho	Workforce Development Training Funds	Idaho Department of Labor Workforce Development Council	\$5 million	Training reimbursement for employers who are expanding or trying to retain at least five positions. The WDTF includes Employer Grants, Innovation Grants, and Sector Grants. Employer Grants Eligibility: Idaho employers who are increasing their current workforce and/or retraining existing workers with skills necessary for specific economic opportunities or industrial expansion initiatives. The fund is designed to support an employer's innovation of its processes, products and services; and/or the development of new goods or services which will improve the employer's competitive position within the industry. Employers must make the case that training is needed to retrain existing workers to respond to a new opportunity or industrial expansion.	Yes, if employer makes a good case	https://wdc.idaho.gov/workforce-development-training-fund/
Indiana	Skills Enhancement Fund	Indiana Economic Development Corporation	\$12.5 million	The Skills Enhancement Fund (SEF) provide assistance to companies to support training of employees required to support business growth in Indiana. The grant may be provided to reimburse a portion (typically 50%) of eligible training costs over a period of two full calendar years from the commencement of the project. Grants from the Skills Enhancement Fund may only support training that leads to a post-secondary or nationally-recognized industry credential, or is specialized company training. If the training is provided to an existing employee, the company must also provide an increase in wages.	Yes	https://iedc.in.gov/incentives/skills-enhancement-fund-sef/home
	Employer Training Grant	Indiana Department of Workforce Development	\$20 million	The Employer Training Grant reimburses employers who train, hire, and retain new or incumbent workers to fill in-demand positions within recognized job fields. The ETG is available to help fill in-demand positions within six priority sectors. The grant will reimburse employers up to \$5,000 per employee who is trained, hired, and retained for six months, up to \$50,000 per employer.	Yes, but rarely	https://www.nextleveljobs.org/Employer/How-It-Works
Iowa	Iowa Jobs Training Program (260F)	Iowa Economic Development Authority	Unavailable	The Iowa Jobs Training Program (260F) provides job training services to help current employees of eligible businesses build new skills. Eligible businesses work with the local community college, which will assess training needs, determine funds available and provide training.		https://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/Business/260f
Kentucky	Grant-in-Aid	Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development Bluegrass State Skills Corporation Board	\$4.3 million	The competitive Grant-in-Aid provides funding reimbursements for worker training at Kentucky's new and expanding companies and for skills and occupational upgrade training for workers of Kentucky's existing companies. Qualified companies include manufacturers, agribusiness, non-retail service or technology companies, national or regional headquarters, healthcare companies and training consortia.	Yes	http://thinkkentucky.com/Workforce/BSSC.aspx
	Skills Training Investment Credit Program	Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development Bluegrass State Skills Corporation Board	\$2.5 million	The Skills Training Investment Credit (STIC) offers state income tax credits for companies to offset the costs for approved training programs provided to incumbent employees of companies engaged in the manufacturing, agribusiness, non-retail service or technology, national or regional headquarters, and healthcare company sectors.	Yes	http://thinkkentucky.com/Workforce/BSSC.aspx
Louisiana	Incumbent Worker Training Program	The Department of Labor Louisiana Workforce Commission	\$25 million	The Incumbent Worker Training Program (IWTP) creates training partnerships among the LWC, business and industry, and training providers. The IWTP is designed to benefit business and industry by assisting in the skill development of existing employees, thereby increasing employee productivity and company growth. Allows for basic skills, pays for college classes, new machinery training, CTE etc. \$3,000 per employee per year.	Yes	http://www.laworks.net/WorkforceDev/IWTP/IWTP_Main-Menu.asp

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Maryland	EARN Program	Department of Labor	\$8 million	EARN Maryland is a state-funded, competitive workforce development grant program that is industry-led, regional in focus, and a proven strategy for helping businesses cultivate the skilled workforce they need to compete. The program allows for partnerships that focus on incumbent worker training and funds partnerships across industries. Training is provided to both underemployed and unemployed workers.	Yes	https://www.dlir.state.md.us/earn/
	Partnership for Workforce Quality (PWQ)	"Division of Workforce Development & Adult Learning Maryland Department of Labor"	Unavailable	<p>PWQ provides matching training grants and support services targeted to improve the competitive position of small and mid-sized manufacturing and technology companies. Grants are used to increase the skills of existing workers for new technologies and production processes, improve employee productivity and increase employment stability.</p> <p>BENEFITS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Matching grant funds are used to reimburse up to 50% of the costs of qualified projects. <p>ELIGIBILITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Applicants must be a Maryland employer, may not be in arrears with any State taxing agency, and not be in default with any Commerce program. — Applicants should have a minimum of ten full-time employees. At least 60% of available funds must be awarded to employers with 150 or fewer employees in the State. The Program encourages the participation of small and minority-owned businesses. — Priority will be given to manufacturing and technology companies. In regions of the State where regionally important industries have been identified beyond manufacturing and technology, justification should be provided to approve PWQ funding. 	No	http://commerce.maryland.gov/grow/partnership-for-workforce-quality-pwq
Massachusetts	Workforce Training Fund Programs	Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development/ Commonwealth Corporation	\$17.6 million	Grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$250,000 are awarded competitively to Massachusetts employers (or consortia of employers) to train their current and newly hired full-time and part-time employees. Companies of any size with a workforce in Massachusetts are eligible. All trainees must be payroll employees of participating companies that are employed in Massachusetts. Employers must provide a match, but this may be pay for time involved in the program. Employers are encouraged to apply for grants focusing on adult basic education (ABE) and/or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL).	Yes	http://workforce-trainingfund.org/programs/general-program/guidelines/
	Healthcare Worker Transformation Fund	Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development/ Commonwealth Corporation	Unavailable	The Healthcare Worker Transformation Fund (HWTF) was created to help the healthcare industry build incumbent worker skills, improve recruitment, and keep training costs down. HWTF supports training programs that address workforce skill needs identified by health care providers as they work to improve patient care and reduce costs.	No	http://commcorp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/HCWTF-Case-Studies_Combined-File.pdf
Minnesota	Partnership Program	Department of Employment and Economic Development	Unavailable	Grants of up to \$400,000 for educational institutions that partner with businesses to provide training for new and incumbent workers. Employers must provide at 1:1 match in funds or in-kind donations.	Yes, but limited	https://mn.gov/deed/business/financing-business/training-grant/
	Pathways Program	Department of Employment and Economic Development	Unavailable	Grants of up to \$400,000 for educational institutions or nonprofit providers partnering with businesses to provide training, new jobs, or transitions from welfare to work for those earning under 200 percent of the poverty level. Employers must match 50% with money or in-kind donations	Yes	https://mn.gov/deed/business/financing-business/training-grant/pathways/

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Mississippi	Workforce Enhancement Training Fund	Mississippi Department of Employment Security	Unavailable	This program supports a variety of types of workforce training, including pre-employment, train-the-trainer, and customized industry training. Funds are administered by MDES and typically go to community colleges to work with business and industry to design and implement a customized job-training program that meets specific personnel needs. However, for training that is not available at the community colleges, the business or industry may receive funding to provide industry-specific training (reimbursable at \$35/hour, or higher for more advanced skills). Other options also include third-party vendor training (up to \$20,000 per year), online training developed by the college or third party vendor (\$250 per person, up to \$20,000 annually), or nationally recognized credentialing.	No	https://www.mississippi.org/advantages/workforce/
	Mississippi Works Fund	Mississippi Development Authority	\$50 million over 10 years	"The Mississippi Works Fund helps grow the state's dedicated and skilled workforce to meet the demands of new and existing businesses. This fund allocates \$50 million over 10 years toward the state's 15 community colleges. Workforce training providers can enhance their already customized training programs to more effectively meet the needs of companies and prepare more Mississippians for in-demand careers. Under the statute, 25 percent of funding goes to the existing workforce and certification, while 75 percent goes to new job creation.	No	https://www.mississippi.org/advantages/workforce/
Montana	Incumbent Worker Training Program	Department of Labor and Industry	\$500,000	Companies can receive \$2,000 for each full-time worker, \$1,000 for each part-time worker. Foundational skills are not covered by this training.	No	http://wsd.dli.mt.gov/employers/incumbent-worker-training-program
Nebraska	Worker Training Grants	Department of Labor	Unavailable	Worker Training Grants are intended for retraining or upgrading worker skills needed to improve business productivity. Only jobs identified by the state Department of Labor as H3 jobs are eligible for training. H3 jobs are defined as high wage, high skill, and high demand jobs, although some middle-skill jobs are included.	No	https://www.dol.nebraska.gov/EmploymentAndTraining/Businesses
New Hampshire	Job Training Fund	Office of Workforce Opportunity and Community Colleges	\$2 million	The Job Training Fund upgrades incumbent and new workers' skills. The fund is matched by employer contributions. Grants range from \$750-100,000. Since its inception in 2007, the Job Training Fund has distributed over 500 grants supporting training to more than 25,000 workers.	Yes	https://www.nhjob-trainingfund.org/about-the-fund/
New Jersey	UPSKILL: NJ Incumbent Worker Training Grant	Department of Labor and Workforce Investment	\$6 million	The UPSKILL: NJ Incumbent Worker Training Grant program can be used to fund courses aimed at expanding literacy. However, the primary focus is occupational skills that result in an industry-valued credential and other measurable outcomes, such as wage increases for trainees.	Yes, possibly	https://careerconnections.nj.gov/careerconnections/hire/training/skills/skills_partnership_program.shtml
New York	Existing Employee Training Program (EET)	Department of Labor, Division of Employment and Workforce Solutions	\$5 million (shared with UWT program)	The Existing Employee Training Program provides occupational skills training for job advancement and retention to existing employees who are in low and middle-skills occupations. Private for-profit businesses, private not-for-profit businesses; or a consortium of businesses are all eligible for the program. The funding is to be used for occupational skills training with up to a year of instruction for existing employees to place or retain them in middle-skills occupations.	Unlikely	https://www.labor.ny.gov/cfa/CFA-WDI-Existing-Employee-Training-RFA-Final.pdf
	Unemployed/Underemployed Training Program (UWT)	Department of Labor, Division of Employment and Workforce Solutions	\$5 million (shared with EET program)	The Unemployed/Underemployed Worker Training program (UWT) focuses on occupational training and prioritizes certain high need populations including English language learners, TANF, and SNAP recipients. For-profit, non-profit, and a variety of trainers are eligible. The program covers tuition, on-line credentialing, supportive services, software, and books/fees.	Unlikely	https://www.labor.ny.gov/cfa/CFA-WDI-Unemployed-Worker-Training-RFA-Final.pdf

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North Carolina	NCWorks Incumbent Worker Training Grants	State Workforce Board	Unavailable (may be depleted)	For NCWorks Incumbent Training Grants, local workforce development boards determine how grants will be administered for their area. Grant recipients are for-profit businesses that are retaining workers by building skills. Businesses can receive up to \$10,000 for each grant, with a \$60,000 lifetime max. Funds can be used to cover training costs such as instructional costs, certification exams, online instruction, related skills assessments, textbooks and manuals, instructor travel, and computer software.	Possibly	https://edpnc.com/incentives/workforce-training-and-development/
Pennsylvania	Workforce and Economic Development Network of Pennsylvania (WEDnetPA), aka Guaranteed Free Training Program	Department of Community and Economic Development		To receive training under WEDnetPA, workers must earn more than 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level and be permanent employees making at least \$10.88 per hour at the start of training. Businesses can apply for funding for up to \$600 per worker for essentials training (which can include math and digital literacy skills) and up to \$1,200 worker for technical skills training. Essential skills training is limited to primarily businesses in manufacturing, technology, and a list of inpatient and outpatient medical businesses. Essential skills are those required in the current position, but adult literacy training, and specifically ESL, are barred.	Yes, but only math or digital literacy	https://dced.pa.gov/programs/wednetpa/
Rhode Island	Incumbent Worker Training	Governor's Workforce Board	\$550,000	The IWTG Program was created for providing grant funding for continuing education, training, and upskilling of incumbent employees at existing Rhode Island employers. While the program does not focus on basic skills, they are allowed if needed in order to remain competitive. Allowable training must show both a benefit for the employer and employees, such as improving wages, improving competitiveness, or skill attainment. All applications must show that training is needed to respond to new market opportunities, a change in regulations or standards, changing skill requirements, rapidly changing technological needs, or if a worker could attain an industry-recognized credential as a result of training.	Yes	https://gwb.ri.gov/incumbent-working-training-grant-program-to-re-open
	Real Jobs Rhode Island	Governor's Workforce Board		The goal of Real Jobs RI is to develop Real Jobs Partnerships that convene industry employers, key stakeholders and groups in partnerships that build alliances to address business workforce demands. Incumbent worker training is a growing part of RJRI, and allows employers to identify types of training their staff need and work with a sector partnership to meet those training needs. Note that RJRI combines multiple funding sources including state funds and private foundation funds, among others.	Yes	https://dlt.ri.gov/realjobsri/
Texas	Skills Development Fund for Employers	Texas Workforce Commission	\$24 million	The Skills Development Fund (SDF) program assists businesses and trade unions by financing the design and implementation of customized job-training projects. Sixty percent of funds go to support incumbent worker skills, while 40 percent goes to developing new jobs. This fund merges business needs and local customized training opportunities to increase the skill levels and wages of the Texas workforce. To be considered for a SDF grant, employers must: 1) Partner with a public community or technical college, the Texas Engineering Extension Service, or a private, nonprofit community-based organization in partnership with one of those institutions; 2) be actively involved in the planning and design of the customized training project, 3) pay wages to the employees who successfully complete the training program that are equal to or greater than the prevailing wage for the occupation in the local labor market; and 4) meet other requirements.	Yes (up to 10%?)	https://twc.texas.gov/businesses/skills-development-fund-employers
	Skills for Small Businesses	Texas Workforce Commission	Up to \$2m	The Skills for Small Businesses is for employers with 100 or fewer employees. It is focused on new hires, although incumbent workers may also receive training. All training must be provided by one of the community or technical colleges or the Texas Engineering Extension Service. No third party vendors are eligible. Only training from an existing catalog or list of courses is eligible. Courses must have a clear and direct application to business needs. The program pays up to \$1,800 for each new employee being trained and \$900 for existing employees during a 12-month period.	Unclear	https://twc.texas.gov/businesses/skills-small-business-employers

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Utah	Custom Fit Program	Utah System of Technical Colleges	\$4.5 million	The Custom Fit Program is run through the Utah System of Technical Colleges, and also includes programs at Utah State University locations and Salt Lake Community College, which receives its own appropriation and has separate rules. The state is divided into 11 Custom Fit regions and businesses apply to the school in their region. Businesses are required to provide some matching funds (percentage varies). Training may be offered through colleges' existing courses or via customized courses, and can include some foundational skills such as digital literacy.	Yes	https://business.utah.gov/news/custom-fit-provides-tailored-training/
Vermont	Vermont Training Program	Department of Economic Development	\$1.3 million	The Vermont Training Partnership (VTP) partners with employers and training providers to prepare Vermont's employees for the jobs of tomorrow. VTP provides performance-based workforce grants for pre-employment training, training for new hires, and training for incumbent workers. This training can either be on-site or offered through an outside provider. VTP grants may cover up to 50% of the training cost.	Yes	https://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/funding-incentives/vtp
Washington	Customized Training Program	State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	\$150,000/revolving fund	Interest-free, revolving loan to support worker training. The CTP requires both a business and a qualified training institution. The latter includes public community or technical colleges or a licensed private vocational school located in Washington state. Businesses have multiple options for what training to provide. Training explicitly includes foundational as well as technical skills, training equipment, skills assessment, facilities, and supplies. One unusual innovation is that businesses are encouraged to explore options for allowing trainees to transcript skills and competencies so that they may receive credit for prior learning at an educational institution.	Yes	https://www.sbctc.edu/for-employers/customized-training.aspx
	Job Skills Program	State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	\$5.45 million every two years	Training program for new or incumbent workers, focused on employers with a shortage of skilled workers in low-income or high unemployment areas. Requires an employer and educational institution partner. Funds licensed education institution to provide short-training in concert with employer needs. Employers provide a 50 percent match in cash, salary, or other in-kind donations.	Yes	https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/grants/job-skills-grant.aspx
West Virginia	Governor's Guaranteed Workforce Program	West Virginia Department of Commerce	\$1.1 million	This program provides new or expanding companies with training funds and technical assistance to support effective employee training strategies. Not limited to new employees, this program targets the business's entire workforce, training, re-training and upgrading skills across all levels. Since the program's launch, more than \$54 million has been awarded to employers and nearly 200,000 employees have received training.	No	https://westvirginia.gov/incentives-and-programs/workforce-programs/
Wisconsin	FastForward Program	Department of Workforce Development	\$11.5 million	FastForward provides worker training grants based on employer-identified needs. This incumbent worker training program is available to individual employers or consortia. Most training participants are lower- or mid-level workers who are becoming lead workers. Foundational skills can be included in the training.	Yes, but rare	http://wisconsinfastforward.com/
	Workforce Advancement Training	Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation & Wisconsin Technical College System	\$1.5 million	The program aids businesses in attracting, developing and retaining talent as a part of a business development project. The program provides grant funds to businesses to upgrade or improve the job-related skills of a business's existing and new employees.	No	https://mywtcs.wtcsystem.edu/grants/general-purpose-revenue-(gpr)
Wyoming	Workforce Development Training Fund - Business Training Grants	Wyoming Department of Workforce Services	\$1.4 million	The Business Training Grant program (BTG), supports employers by providing reimbursement for training that addresses employee skill deficiencies or upgrades an employee's current skill level. The program is for both new hires and existing workers and can include basic skills. The employer must demonstrate that the skill upgrade will enhance the business' productivity, efficiency or profitability, reduce employee turnover, and enhance employee wages.	Yes	http://wyoming-workforce.org/businesses/wdtd/

*Funding data reflects most recent year available, typically FY2019 or FY2020.



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