

Promising Approaches to Workforce Development in Texas

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this white paper is to explore best practices in the world of private workforce development in Texas—with an eye toward those programs that demonstrate the most promise for successfully lifting people out of poverty, promoting individual and family success, moving individuals to self-sufficiency, and leading to general human flourishing.

In broad economic terms, Texas is one of the most prosperous states in America. One recent study ranked Texas the third best state for business in 2020 ([DePietro](#)); another gave the Lone Star State the distinction of the best state in the U.S. to start a new business ([McCann](#)). *Forbes* has ranked Texas as the fourth best state for economic climate and the first for growth prospects—and what's more, 100 of the 1,000 largest public and private companies in the U.S. are based in Texas. In terms of pure scope, Texas' economy is the second largest in the U.S., only trailing California ([Forbes](#)). And if Texas were a nation, it would have the 10th largest gross domestic product in the world—ahead of Canada and behind Brazil—at around \$1.7 trillion in economic output ([Perry](#)).

But amidst this economic prosperity another story is unfolding concurrently. Many are struggling and rely on government programs to subsist. A selection of pertinent facts:

- The U.S. Census Bureau reported Texas' poverty rate at just under 15 percent as of December 2019, compared to 11.8 percent for the U.S. as a whole in 2018 ([Semega](#)).
- Fully one in five children in Texas lives in poverty ([Casey Foundation 2019b](#)).
- Although Texas ranks well on a general well-being index ([Gallup, 1](#)), many face high barriers to employment, lacking access to suitable child care, reliable transportation, or stable and affordable housing. Still more struggle with issues of poor mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, and physical disabilities.
- Texas ranks low in childhood well-being: 41st out of 50 states ([Casey Foundation 2019a](#)).
- Texas has a large immigrant population with language and cultural hurdles that present potential barriers to success in the labor market. Texas has the second largest number of Mexican immigrants (2.54 million) trailing only California ([Migration Policy Institute](#)).
- Texas ranks squarely in the middle in terms of unemployment (24th out of 50 states). As for the labor force participation rate—which can more accurately capture the number of discouraged workers not in the labor market—the Texas rate was 63.8 percent in July 2019, which is comparable to the national rate of 63 percent ([Texas Workforce Commission 2018, 8](#)).

Key Points

- Public policy and social services should not be based on hunches and anecdotal success stories. Low-income Texas families deserve interventions that are backed by evidence that they work.
- The social service community contains the innovations that can show us how to help families escape poverty.
- There is evidence suggesting that investing in workforce programs saves taxpayer money over providing welfare assistance.

Employers increasingly report a mismatch between what the labor market demands and what employees are able to offer ([Aaron](#)).

The summation is that many economic opportunities exist in Texas, but a proportion of the population lacks the resources to tap into these opportunities. An added factor is that the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic is creating even more economic shockwaves in Texas, combined with recent contractions in the oil market. As of June 19, 2020, Texas faces a 13 percent unemployment rate ([Texas Workforce Commission 2020b](#)). That is where private workforce development programs come into play—those programs are designed to help those struggling to make ends meet attain the skills necessary and overcome personal barriers to achieve self-sufficiency and, ultimately, human flourishing. These programs are a key way that individuals may also leave reliance on welfare behind ([Holzer, 64](#)).

In the pages that follow, we provide a broad overview of poverty in Texas and the social safety net that is designed to help the impoverished. We will then delve into some of the most promising examples of private welfare-to-work programs in Texas—evidenced by strong randomized controlled trials (RCT), the gold standard for empirical evidence—in addition to a number of other programs that lack rigorous evidence of outcomes but also demonstrate promising approaches to helping welfare-dependent Texans and those in poverty. We conclude with a summary of attributes that characterize these workforce programs.

Note: The bulk of this paper was written prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. However, we still believe that this paper's findings and conclusions are relevant—even more so in the post-coronavirus economic recovery, with the anticipated added stress on social-safety net programs and dire need for workforce training for displaced workers.

Private workforce development programs are designed to help those struggling to make ends meet to attain the skills necessary to overcome personal barriers and achieve self-sufficiency and human flourishing.

PART 1: OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET IN TEXAS

Who Participates in Social Safety Net Programs in Texas?

A number of characteristics tend to define the typical recipient of government assistance: they are more likely to be female, a single parent, possess a high school education or less, and a minority. The American Community Survey provides characteristics of Texans receiving government assistance (food stamps, public assistance or welfare, supplemental security income, and Medicaid):¹

- **Gender:** Women are more likely than men (21 percent vs. 16 percent) to have received government assistance in the past year.
- **Family status:** On average, 32 percent of female-led households participated in government-assistance programs. Nearly half of these women (48 percent) are single parents raising two kids on average.
- **Education:** Adults receiving government assistance tend to have completed lower levels of education. Roughly 32 percent lack a high school credential, such as a diploma or GED, and another 57 percent have earned a high school diploma but do not have a post-secondary degree.
- **Immigration status:** 38 percent of immigrant-led households—those headed by naturalized citizens and non-citizens—receive assistance compared to 23 percent of households led by native-born counterparts. Language is a potential barrier for these household heads, with roughly half reporting limited English-speaking ability.
- **Ethnicity and race:** Hispanic and black Texans are more likely to receive government assistance than white Texans (27 percent vs. 11 percent). While this gap is large, it is reflective of barriers that these communities face in the labor market. For instance, nearly a third of the gap can be explained by differences in educational attainment alone.

¹ The following statistics are based on calculations using the 2012–2016 five-year sample of the American Community Survey (ACS) provided by the IPUMS USA database ([Ruggles et al. 2020](#)). The sample includes adults aged 18–64 not living in group quarters and is weighted by ACS person weights.

Texas Social Safety Net Programs

Texas primarily relies on six social safety net programs: the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Medicaid, housing assistance, and the free and reduced-price lunch program in public schools.

As of March 2019, 48,077 adults and children in Texas were receiving TANF benefits (a mere 0.16 percent of Texas' 29.47 million population at the time) ([ACF 2019, 1](#)); around 3.2 million were eligible for food stamps (also known as SNAP) in January 2020 (around 11 percent of the population at the time) ([Food and Nutrition Services](#)); 678,863 women and children were on WIC as of January 2020 preliminary numbers (around 2.3 percent of the population at the time) ([USDA](#)); 3.88 million were enrolled in Medicaid as of August 2019 (13.3 percent of the population at the time) ([Texas HHS 2019](#)); over 273,000 were receiving rental assistance according to March 2017 statistics (around 1 percent of the population at the time) ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2017, 1](#)); and over 3 million students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch as of the 2014-2015 school year (close to 60 percent of the children in the state) ([National Center for Education Statistics 2016](#)).

What do we know about participation rates for specific social safety net programs in Texas? Texas social safety net participation rates are below U.S. averages and have been declining in recent years. Part of this is due to a robust economy and low unemployment rate; another reason is possibly due to the complex way that Texas implements its safety-net programs ([Ura 2017](#)).

Here is specific data:

- Drawing from 2019 numbers, Texas' TANF caseload accounted for just 2.4 percent of the overall U.S. caseloads ([ACF 2019, 1](#)), despite Texas' population representing approximately 9 percent of the U.S. population. What's more, TANF participation rates have been steadily declining in Texas—for example, by nearly 76 percent between 1997 and 2010 ([Loprest, 3](#)). As of 2016, a majority of TANF recipients in Texas were Hispanic (60.9 percent), followed by African Americans (24.4 percent) and whites (13.6 percent); and the vast majority were single (78.4 percent) ([ACF 2016, 13, 26](#)).
- For SNAP, 37,106,986 people were participating in January 2020 in the U.S. as a whole, making Texas' share around 8.7 percent ([USDA 2020](#)). The number of Texans enrolled in SNAP has jumped from 505,968 in 2000 to present levels ([Ura 2015](#)), but in more recent

years have declined (though not as quickly as in many other states) ([Rosenbaum and Keith-Jennings](#)). According to data from the 2017 fiscal year, Texans receiving food stamps were more likely to be in families with children than the U.S. average and also more likely to be in working families ([Nchako and Cai](#)).

- For Medicaid, 17 percent of the Texas population was covered by the program as of October 2019 ([Kaiser 2019a](#)). As of this writing, Texas is 1 of 14 states that have opted not to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act ([Kaiser 2020](#)), meaning the rolls of those on Medicaid are much lower than they could be. That compares to approximately 21 percent of the overall U.S. population on Medicaid ([Kaiser 2019b](#)). Enrollment in Medicaid in Texas has declined from just over 4 million in 2015 to 3.86 million in June 2019 ([Texas HHS 2019](#)).

Texas: Low Social Safety Net Participation Rates

Among the 50 states, Texas has one of the lowest rates of people on welfare, according to U.S. Census data. Using 2012 data, it showed that only Wyoming, South Carolina, North Dakota, and Louisiana had lower percentages of people receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) than Texas ([Bernier](#)). Only six states—Georgia, Utah, South Dakota, Florida, North Carolina, and Connecticut—spend less than Texas on per capita welfare expenditures ([Urban Institute](#)).

How the Social Safety Net Works in Texas

Texas was one of the first states to reform its safety net system in 1995 in anticipation of changes at the federal level in 1996 ([Capps et al., 1](#)), giving ample control to local governments in managing welfare benefits. For purposes of this white paper, we will primarily focus on Texans enrolled in TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid.

TANF is designed to provide support for needy Texas children and their parents or relatives with whom they are living ([Benefits.gov 2020a](#)). Program requirements mandate that recipients be pregnant or caring for a child under the age of 19, legal citizens, have a low or very low income, and be either under-employed, unemployed, or about to become unemployed. TANF benefit levels are based on family income levels. As of October 2019, a family of three would qualify for \$303 in cash assistance per month ([Burnside and Floyd](#)).

It should be noted that through TANF, states have the option of paying for services for needy families rather than making cash distributions. In 2018, Texas spent only a small fraction of its TANF block grant on basic assistance

(6 percent), which is generally direct cash assistance. This compares to a national U.S. average of 21 percent spent on basic assistance. In Texas, top budget line items were funding for pre-K (39 percent), child welfare (28 percent), and work activities (10 percent) ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2018, 1](#)).

Several elements limit the long-term benefits of TANF. For one, TANF has a nationally enforced lifetime limit of between 12 and 60 months depending on an individual's work and education history ([Texas HHS 2017](#)). On the question of how frequently participants hit that 60-month threshold, an analysis by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) found that a quarter million TANF cases nationwide were closed due to reaching the time limit between 1996 and 2008, and that overall "time-limit closures account for only 2 to 3 percent of all closures in a typical month" ([Farrell et al.](#)). This suggests that only a small percentage of TANF cases are closed for reasons of timing out.

Texas residents may apply for TANF either online or in person at a Texas Health and Human Services office. The application process requires proof of income amounts, statement of value of cars and other personal property, and costs paid for existing bills ([Your Texas Benefits 2020a](#)). Applicants for TANF use the Texas Integrated Eligibility Redesign System (TIERS), in which they can apply online through [YourTexasBenefits.com](#), by mail, by phone, or at a local office. If they are certified to receive benefits, this lasts for five years conditional on remaining eligible for the program and completing work and job search requirements.

In Texas, each TANF recipient is responsible for reporting any changes in income, address, or wealth after their application is submitted or certification is received. Households must report changes in income "within 10 days after the household knows about the change" ([Texas HHS 2020b](#)). Recipients are contacted either through email or text message, and they may recertify online or by submitting a paper form. Applicants are required to recertify even if their household circumstances are unchanged ([Your Texas Benefits 2020b](#)). In Texas, TANF benefits are not counted as income, so no onerous tax penalty occurs as recipients earn more. The TIERS system also conducts periodic income checks that essentially compare the reported income in the application to household data from the Texas Workforce Commission and New Hire Reports. If data here differs from pre-existing information from the application or any updates the household has made, the state will contact the household for verification of continued eligibility ([Texas HHS 2020b](#)).

There is evidence that one of the reasons for recent declines in TANF participation is due to the challenge of successfully applying and maintaining benefits ([Floyd](#)). For the 2016 fiscal year, 39,394 TANF cases were closed in Texas. The most common named reason was "failure to comply" (13.5 percent), followed by "other sanction" (11.1 percent), "work related sanction" (9.2 percent), "employment" (5.9 percent), "voluntary closure" (5.9 percent), and "excess income or resources" (2.6 percent). The remaining cases fell into the category of "other," defined as "loss of eligibility when the youngest child is too old to qualify for assistance, a case is transferred to a separate state MOE program, or other reason not captured in one of the other categories" ([ACF 2016, 50](#)).

Texas requires TANF recipients to meet work, volunteer, or educational obligations in order to continue receiving benefits. Operating under the Choices program, Texas keys off three overarching principles for welfare recipients: "Government assistance is temporary," "Texans are responsible for the support of themselves and their families," and "employment is the goal" ([Texas Workforce Commission 2019a](#)). Texas' Workforce Orientation for Applicants requires TANF applicants to attend an Employment Planning Session, where they receive an in-depth assessment and develop a Family Employment Plan. Afterward, welfare recipients are generally expected to meet work requirements: at least 30 hours per week for single parents and 35 to 55 hours per week for two-parent families depending on the amount of subsidized child care received.

Texas' Choices program also provides certain wraparound services for participants, including child care, transportation assistance, work-related expenses, and payments for GED credential testing. Moreover, Choices continues to support welfare recipients after they land a job through case management, ongoing wraparound services, mentoring, and more. Some parents are eligible to continue receiving child care assistance even after leaving the Choices program for one of two reasons: Firstly, if he or she was denied TANF benefits due to increased employment earnings; the 60-month time limit expired; or he or she voluntarily withdrew from TANF; and secondly, if "the parent requires child care to work or attend a job training or educational program for a combination of at least 25 hours per week for a single-parent family or 50 hours per week for a two-parent family, or a higher number of hours per week as established by a Board" ([Texas Workforce Commission 2020a](#)).

Beneficiaries of the SNAP program receive vouchers that can be used to buy food. SNAP is a longer-term program that provides ongoing support for needy families—there is no universal time limit on these benefits. However, Texas

Health and Human Services notes that most adults between the ages of 18 and 49 with no children in the home may only receive SNAP for a three-month period every three years, unless they work at least 20 hours a week or are in vocational training. SNAP benefit levels are set at the federal level. A family of four is eligible for benefits at a monthly income up to \$3,541, and the maximum monthly benefit amount for that family is \$646 ([Your Texas Benefits 2020c](#)).

Texans have the option of applying for SNAP either online or through a paper application. As with TANF, the application requires proof of income amounts, statement of value of cars and other personal property, and costs paid for existing bills ([Your Texas Benefits 2020a](#)). SNAP renewals typically happen “every six to 12 months for most families and every 12 to 24 months for seniors and people with disabilities” ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2019](#)). The renewal process in Texas for SNAP is identical to TANF: Recipients are contacted either through email or text message, and they may recertify online or by submitting a paper form. Applicants are required to renew even if their household circumstances are unchanged ([Your Texas Benefits 2020b](#)).

SNAP recipients in Texas also have a work requirement through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training program. For recipients between the ages of 16 and 59 years, they must work at least 30 hours per week or participate in SNAP Employment & Training. This holds true unless recipients meet certain exemptions, including care for a child under the age of 6 or disability ([Texas Workforce Commission 2019b](#)).

Medicaid provides health insurance coverage for low-income households. To be eligible for Medicaid in Texas, applicants must “be a resident of the state of Texas, a U.S. national, citizen, permanent resident, or legal alien, in need of healthcare/insurance assistance, whose financial situation would be characterized as low income or very low income” and also “be either pregnant, a parent or relative caretaker of a dependent child(ren) under age 19, blind, have a disability or a family member in your household with a disability, or be 65 years of age or older.” A family of four is eligible for benefits if their maximum annual income is below or equal to \$50,985 ([Benefits.gov 2020b](#)).

PART 2: SYNTHESIS OF EXISTING WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS IN TEXAS AND BEYOND

While there have been many experimental studies estimating the impacts of welfare reform, open questions remain as to how to best lift welfare recipients out of poverty and into self-sufficiency. The welfare system in the U.S. has dramatically changed over the last few decades, beginning with the Reagan administration in the 1980s and extending through

the 1990s and into the 2000s. During this time, states were given leeway to change the way TANF and other safety-net programs were structured, with a specific focus on expanding work requirements. For example, TANF caseloads have fallen substantially in the decades since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 as individuals facing time-limited benefits and mandatory work requirements re-entered the workforce ([Ziliak 2015](#)). Between 1994 and 2000 alone, the number of families receiving cash welfare assistance nationally plummeted by 56 percent (Bloom and Michalopoulos, 18). As mentioned previously, TANF participation rates have been steadily declining in Texas—for example, by nearly 76 percent between 1997 and 2010 ([Loprest, 3](#)). But this exit of job-ready individuals from welfare caseloads has left behind a set of welfare recipients who face substantially more barriers to employment.

For example, single mothers on TANF have much higher rates of mental health issues, care for children with health problems, and often have recent experience with domestic violence or other trauma compared to non-welfare recipients ([Danzinger et al., 8](#)). To compound matters, these mothers often have lower skills, report experiences of perceived discrimination in the workplace, and lack reliable transportation and child care. The changing face of welfare caseloads means new approaches are needed to help these hard-to-employ parents get back to work ([Institute for the Research on Poverty 2019](#)).

Enter the world of welfare-to-work programs. Generally speaking, private-sector welfare-to-work programs target disadvantaged populations, provide training in a marketable skill in addition to “soft-skills” training, and offer wrap-around services (such as child care, transportation vouchers, housing assistance, etc.), job placement services, and follow-up services to ensure graduates are on course. The key question is this: What attributes help welfare-to-work programs benefit enrollees the most, and what benefits and cost-savings to society more broadly are generated by these programs?

Taking the existing body of welfare-to-work research as a whole, a number of consistent themes emerge. One, employment services and education or training programs can indeed be used to improve economic outcomes, though gains may materialize over different time horizons ([Card et al.](#)). Second, programs that are more tailored—emphasizing employment or human capital development depending on the particular individual—tend to lead to higher gains (Bloom and Michalopoulos, 15). Finally, programs may be successful at achieving employment and reducing welfare but leave former recipients in low-wage or

part-time jobs that do not bring them out of poverty (Bloom and Michalopoulos, 18).

One comprehensive review of welfare-to-work programs, conducted by MDRC and published in 2009, concluded that such programs that require individuals to participate in education or training activity, or searching for a job, were effective at reducing both welfare expenditures and increasing participants' income ([Greenberg et al., iii](#)). As a caveat, the same research concluded that programs that assign enrollees to unpaid jobs generated limited benefits for individuals or cost savings to government. A similar MDRC analysis from 2001 concluded that job-search-first programs “led to larger gains for more disadvantaged groups, such as people without a high school credential ... [and] were also less expensive to operate” (Bloom and Michalopoulos, ES-2).

A randomized controlled trial study from New Orleans yielded some similarly interesting results ([Baird et al.](#)). The RCT examined a job training program by the New Orleans' Office of Workforce Development funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Workforce Innovation Fund in 2014. Called Career Pathways, the training program helps lower-skilled, unemployed, and under-employed workers find good jobs in the sectors of advanced manufacturing and energy, medical care, and IT. Compared to the control group, Career Pathways produced positive results, including “individuals' wage growth, job satisfaction, and the program's return on investment.”

Of note, the RCT suggested that a sector-focused approach produces positive results for trainees—in this scenario, individuals who completed the healthcare training pathway had the greatest increase in earnings. In addition, keeping a close eye on trends in local industry was pinpointed as crucial. In addition, the RCT also found that “of all screening mechanisms used to select trainees, the Test of Adult Basic Education was most likely to identify applicants who were likely to complete the training program, whereas screening by community partners was least successful.”

Another two-year RCT examined results for WorkAdvance, a technical training program that provides soft- and hard-skill training designed to help participants secure jobs and then grow in their careers. The study had four location sites: Bronx, NY; Brooklyn, NY; Tulsa, OK; Cleveland, OH. The RCT concluded that the program “resulted in very large increases in participation in every category of services, as well as in training completion and credential acquisition, compared with what would have happened in the absence of the program.” Of note, the WorkAdvance model delivers “demand-driven skills training and a focus on jobs that have career pathways,” and it “requires providers to be far more

employer-facing than traditional training programs, taking into account multiple employers' changing skill requirements, employee assessment practices, and personnel needs” ([Hendra et al., ES-7, iii](#)).

One recent analysis identified five markers of effective workforce training initiatives. They must:

- Engage participants and deliver the exact skills required for each profession. The model is immersive and intensive.
- Focus on specialized training modules that integrate technical, behavioral, and mind-set skills required where on-the-job failure is most likely to occur.
- Use a curriculum that emphasizes practical skills. Approaches include simulations (physical and/or digital), interactive animations, and site visits.
- Assess participants on a regular basis, ensuring that problems are identified and addressed. Students must show mastery of all necessary skills.
- Deliver instruction in many different ways. In addition to conventional in-person classroom instruction, online, video, and mobile methods are all used. ([Laboissiere and Mourshed](#))

Ultimately, more evidence is needed on the effectiveness of intensive programs designed to ameliorate the many, intricately linked barriers that disadvantaged welfare recipients face. Few programs offer a holistic approach that includes a detailed assessment with individualized service plan, small enough caseloads for intensive one-on-one coaching/mentoring, and long-term supports to help individuals build strengths to overcome the many barriers they face. An evaluation of the intensive home-visitation and life-skills program Building Nebraska Families shows the promise of this type of comprehensive approach ([Meckstroth et al.](#)). Importantly, nonprofit service partners are particularly well-poised to serve this population, as they have the ability to build long-term service relationships to support individuals as they transition from welfare to employment.

PART 3: EFFORTS TO PROMOTE SELF-SUFFICIENCY THAT SHOW PROMISE IN TEXAS

Three workforce development initiatives in Texas have demonstrated positive impact through RCT evaluations. We explore these and other initiatives that show promise—but lack the same level of rigorous evaluation—below.



Project QUEST

Project QUEST is a sectoral approach that provides comprehensive help for low-income individuals to earn post-secondary credentials and access well-paying jobs. The organization's genesis dates back to the early 1990s when two community organizations in San Antonio—Communities Organized for Public Service and Metro Alliance—saw a dire local need to move non-working or low-income workers up the economic ranks through employment placements in strong sectors of the local economy. Many of these areas tie back to the common workforce barriers faced by the disadvantaged in Texas identified at the beginning of this white paper.

In San Antonio, Project QUEST increased graduate earnings by \$5,490, or 20 percent, nine years after program entry, substantially more than a randomized control group (Roder and Elliott, 17). The evaluation focused on job training in the healthcare industry and is a prime example of a longer-term study that tracks success over a lengthy period of time, rather than a few months or years. Eighty-five percent of participants sought to enter non-degree certificate programs to become licensed vocational nurses or medical records coders; the remaining 15 percent sought associate's degrees. While 84 percent of participants had worked in the past year, their average annual earnings were only \$11,722 (3). The vast majority of participants were female and minority, marking an appealing approach for welfare-to-work efforts.



Year Up

Although a national nonprofit with locations in 11 states, Year Up has a strong presence in the Dallas/Fort Worth region. Year Up focuses on linking disadvantaged “opportunity” youth with middle-skills jobs in the IT sector. Year Up was launched in Boston in 2000, the brainchild of Gerald Chertavian who mentored a young man from the projects in Manhattan and realized the yawning opportunity gap faced by struggling youth. He used \$500,000 of his own money, plus support from donors, to launch Year Up. Year Up works with youth between the ages of 18 and 24 with a high-school diploma or GED but no clear direction in their lives.

Year Up targets young people in the gap between high-school dropouts and college graduates. Youths must fill out a detailed application, submit a writing sample and

references, and undergo two interviews. Only 10 percent of applicants are ultimately successful and accepted. Year Up trainees receive six months of full-time training leading to a six-month internship with a corporate partner, and they also earn between 18 and 30 college credit hours for successfully completing the program (Bass, 65-66). More than 250 companies partner with Year Up (Year Up).

For results, Year Up is one of nine programs currently being reviewed by Abt Associates in the federally sponsored Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation. For one Year Up RCT, 2,544 randomly assigned young adults were placed in the treatment group (1,669) and control group (875). “Average quarterly earnings were \$1,895 higher for the treatment group (\$5,454) than for the control group (\$3,559)—a 53 percent impact. Impacts diminished but remained large (about 40 percent) over the following year” (Fein and Hamadyk, i).

While no RCT exists specifically for the Dallas/Fort Worth chapter of Year Up, the organization evaluates student outcomes at the four-month and 12-month mark after graduation. The job employment rate is 72 percent and the average wage is \$20 per hour (Jasmine Collier, director of institutional giving for Year Up Southeast region, pers. comm., January 8, 2020). Year Up is also currently partnering with Opportunity Insights for a nationwide analysis of social mobility for its graduates, including at the Dallas site. The results are expected in 2021 and could shed additional light on the effectiveness of Year Up's approach.



The Padua Program

Another RCT, this one conducted by the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO) at the University of Notre Dame, found substantial increases in both work participation and earnings for families that went through the Padua Program, which was implemented by Catholic Charities in Fort Worth. The goal of the Padua Program is to increase work participation, self-sufficiency, and savings while decreasing debt and dependence on government transfer programs.

The program is a holistic, individualized wraparound service intervention that includes “a detailed needs assessment, an individualized service plan, intensive case management administered by a two-person team with small caseloads, and temporary financial assistance to overcome obstacles to self-sufficiency and incentivize behavior.” With the goal of overcoming obstacles first and foremost, the Padua Program's interventions include everything from “job training

to housing assistance to immigration assistance to budgeting and financial literacy to emotional counseling” (Evans et al. 2020).

The LEO team’s RCT included 427 participants who were enrolled into the study over the course of two years, from spring 2015 through fall 2016, and received services for about 17 months on average. The program increased employment by 25 percent and produced increases in self-reported health relative to a control group. The most significant, life-improving gains were seen for two groups: one, those who were not working at baseline (the program raised “the probability of working full time by 67 percent, the chance of working by 26 percent and monthly earnings by 46 percent”); and two, those who were stably housed at the time of entry into the program.

The study highlights two key points. One, due to the customized nature of the Padua Program, it is likely to have different outcomes for different groups. Case managers develop an individualized plan with each Padua client and so focus on different goals given the context. Indeed, participants who entered the program with stable housing arrangements were shown to have large gains in employment and earnings relative to the control group, whereas those who entered without stable housing did not see similar gains in labor market outcomes. This latter group, in turn, was more likely to be in stable housing two years after randomization. Two, the program requires substantial resources for each participating family (at around \$11,000 per case in 2016 dollars) and a significant time investment from the participant and case team. While the financial and time costs are large, they are in line with similar case management interventions. Future work looking at the long-term effects on earnings and other related outcomes, such as usage of government benefit programs, will be needed to determine whether positive impacts justify the large program costs.

Other Promising Examples

Regrettably, many workforce programs in the Lone Star State lack rigorous evaluative evidence—the gold standard for which is an RCT. But the examples presented here show potential, despite lacking the same degree of rigor compared to other examples. In this section, we make several broad strokes to examine a number of programs that show promise to move the needle in transforming the Texas workforce.



One model that shows signs of promise is the **United Way of Greater Houston’s THRIVE program**—specifically its Women in Construction initiative. THRIVE has partnered with two construction companies, TD Industries

and S&B Engineers and Constructors, to create a 12-week training program that culminates in female graduates being placed in well-compensated construction jobs with healthcare benefits. The program also provides wraparound services essential to the women they serve. Each family benefits from a comprehensive and individualized plan that addresses the key barriers they face ([United Way, 2](#)), and the focus is not exclusively on workforce training but the other side of the coin as well—financial education and coaching to eliminate debt and begin saving money.

In the scope of its impact on helping Texans leap from reliance on government programs to self-sufficiency, this program has particular appeal: A higher ratio of women than men rely on government assistance such as food stamps ([Morin](#)).

prison entrepreneurship program

Another example, the **Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP)**, trains men behind prison walls with the skills of entrepreneurship and business. Its model has shown

promise for helping ex-offenders successfully acclimate into society—not just by avoiding repeat criminal activity but by creating men who launch businesses, land stable jobs, reengage with children and family, and contribute to the local economy and culture in positive ways ([AEI](#)).

Qualifying inmates must be within three years of release, have (or be pursuing) a high school diploma or GED and cannot be active gang members or sexual offenders. After completing a 20-page application, the top applicants are then given a study packet and a 50-question test. Those who score above 70 percent on the test move on to in-person interviews, which are used to select those applicants that PEP identifies as being a good fit for the program. Selected applicants are then transferred to a prison unit that offers the PEP program.

The PEP program within prison walls involves two primary components—a leadership academy and a business plan competition. For the leadership academy, participants receive 20 hours of class work a week for 12 weeks in a curriculum focused on conflict resolution, social etiquette, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, and dating and marriage skills. For the business plan competition, participants get 1,000 total hours of classroom time for 24 weeks and complete lessons on entrepreneurship, public speaking, business accounting, culminating in the development of a business plan ([PEP](#)).

A number of reports have documented PEP’s success at reducing recidivism and securing economic opportunity for inmates. PEP’s results must be caveated, however, with the

fact that the program is highly selective in the types of prisoners allowed in. A non-RCT analysis found that, compared to PEP participants, participants in non-PEP rehabilitation programs were nearly four times more likely to recidivate ([Johnson et. al., 28](#)). A more recent analysis from the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC)—also non-RCT—reviewed 2017 annual survey data from 371 PEP graduates and conducted interviews with 38 PEP graduates in 2018, including 18 full-time entrepreneurs with active businesses. ICIC measured four variables: income, economic stability, wealth building, and healthcare.

Nearly 1 out of 4 PEP graduates had started a business, and 57 percent of PEP businesses formed between 2004 and 2018 remained opened, slightly higher than the general Texas rate of 53 percent ([ICIC, 22](#)). Ninety-four percent of PEP graduates surveyed in 2017 were either employed or self-employed, compared to 43 percent of all ex-inmates in Texas. PEP graduates also averaged wages of \$17.17 per hour, 137 percent greater than the Texas minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. Over 85 percent of PEP graduates had savings accounts three years after release, and nearly 40 percent of graduates released for at least three years are homeowners. As for helping men successfully transition out of prison and not go back, PEP had a three-year recidivism rate of 7 percent compared to a three-year male average for Texas broadly of 23 percent ([23-24, 26, 34](#)).



The **Goodwill Excel Center in Austin** is another promising example. Based on a program model developed by Goodwill of Central Indiana, it is

the first free public charter high school in Texas, catering to adults between the ages of 18 and 50 who never graduated from high school ([Goodwill Excel Center](#)). The program culminates in each student earning their high-school diploma, completing an in-demand professional certification, and beginning their journey to a post-secondary credential. Wraparound services include free child care, transportation vouchers, and coaching and support. Flexible class schedules ensure that students can work their studies around other obligations. The Excel Center also provides six 7-week sessions to accelerate the path to a credential.



Similarly, the nonprofit **PelotonU in Austin** takes a multi-faceted approach to helping individuals gain work experience and a marketable credential. Founded in 2013, PelotonU matches students with accredited online learning, a job opportunity, a community-based learning environment in the Austin area, and a coach to help shepherd them through the process. To date, PelotonU has an 81 percent graduation rate ([PelotonU](#)). The nonprofit has served 242

students so far, who, on average when they start, are 27 years old earning \$19,896. Seventy-nine degrees in total have been conferred, and bachelor's degree alumni have seen an average increase in wages of \$20,784. (Hudson Baird, PelotonU executive director, pers. comm., January 13, 2020).



One example of a sector-focused workforce program in

Texas is **Skillpoint Alliance**. It provides programs in seven areas: nurse aide, pre-apprentice electrical, HVAC technician, plumbing, carpentry, culinary arts, and basic construction.

Skillpoint Alliance additionally focuses on helping individuals in underrepresented communities with the ultimate goal of helping to close the poverty gap. As for results, in 2018 the program trained 165 individuals with a 90 percent graduation rate ([Skillpoint Alliance, 13](#)). Ninety of those participants were unemployed at the time they started the training, and 18 were homeless. By the end of the year, 65 were working in an industry associated with their certification or licensing ([15](#)).



Capital IDEA, based in Austin, provides financial support and professional guidance to non-traditional students. The nonprofit

partners with Austin Community College to offer programs in IT, healthcare, and other in-demand fields. Also offered is a College Prep Academy that helps individuals navigate the barriers and challenges in their lives that could derail them from earning a credential and landing a job. In 2018, Capital IDEA provided direct support to 1,139 individuals and made 107 job placements at an average hourly wage of \$22 ([Capital IDEA, 3](#)). Capital IDEA is currently undergoing an RCT funded by the Arnold Ventures.



Finally, **Breakthrough Central Texas** focuses on first-in-their-family college students. Beginning in the 6th grade, the program recruits students from low-income families, offering them a 12-year commitment from middle school through high school and college. Breakthrough Central Texas offers

extended learning through summer programs, after-school tutoring, Saturday enrichment programs, SAT/ACT prep, comprehensive advising that's available 24/7, and leadership experiences. In 2018, the program served 1,716 students: 97 percent of high school seniors graduated on time and 93 percent of those seniors enrolled directly in college

([Breakthrough Central Texas](#)). To date, there have been 113 first-generation college graduates through the program.

PART 4: THE COST OF MOVING THE NEEDLE VS. KEEPING THE STATUS QUO

One pertinent question is the cost to society if the individuals helped through these workforce programs remain on public assistance and do not gain meaningful employment. What is the ultimate return on investment for society broadly for these programs? We briefly explore that topic in this section.

As a quick back-of-the-envelope calculation in thinking about the return on investment for workforce development programs in Texas, here is one scenario. A single mother with two dependent children would qualify for a maximum TANF amount of \$3,636 per year ([Your Texas Benefits 2020d](#)). For that same family of three, maximum SNAP benefits are \$6,108 per year ([Your Texas Benefits 2020c](#)). Medicaid savings are in the range of \$2,976 for each adult and \$2,966 for each child, so averaging out to \$8,908 for this family of three—assuming the family is able to obtain healthcare coverage through work ([Kaiser 2014](#)). Combining these three programs yields a savings in the range of \$18,652 per year for moving a family off of this assistance and into the workforce.

This figure, then, must be contrasted with the average cost to successfully graduate an individual into the labor force through one of these programs. It is impossible to arrive at a generalized cost per graduate across programs, but we can piece together numbers that suggest a general range. For example, the average cost, in 2017 dollars, to train each participant fell between \$5,675 and \$7,320 at WorkAdvance—which, as previously mentioned, was the subject of a rigorous two-year RCT ([Hendra et al.](#)). A somewhat dated analysis from the late 1990s put the cost per graduate for Project QUEST at \$9,900 (in 2017 dollars) over the course of the entire program ([Rademacher et al., 72](#)). The cost per student for Year Up is more substantial at \$28,290, although employers finance 59 percent of it ([Fein and Hamadyk, O-i](#)).

Some programs highlighted in this white paper have ROI estimates associated with them. For example, the ICIC analysis for PEP compared graduates to a theoretical comparison group that did not receive PEP services. The net fiscal impact to the Texas state government and the federal government in 2017 was \$4.6 million. “In 2017, 357 PEP graduates were released from prison. The estimated fiscal impact per released graduate after one year is \$12,053 in cost savings to the state and federal government. The one-year investment of \$7,591 per released graduate by PEP donors results in a one-year ‘ROI’ of 159%. After five years, the ‘ROI’ increases to 794%” ([ICIC, 61](#)).

CONCLUSION

This white paper has explored the current social safety net landscape in Texas, provided a brief review of the literature on workforce development and welfare-to-work programs aimed at helping the disadvantaged upskill and find employment, and profiled several promising examples of specific organizations working in Texas toward this end. The available evidence suggests the ability of workforce programs to move the needle on helping needy families achieve self-sufficiency, benefiting individual lives and society as a whole.

It is possible to glean from available examples and data some of the most broadly recognized traits of effective workforce development and welfare-to-work programs. These include:

- **A sector focus:** Another best practice is to focus on economically strong and viable sectors of the economy for training. This also helps with the challenge that many graduates of these programs face in transitioning into low-wage or part-time work.
- **Partnerships:** Collaboration between nonprofits, industry, local governments, and schools is a key ingredient for success ([National Skills Coalition](#)).
- **Training for middle-skills jobs:** These occupations require more credentialing than a high-school diploma but less than a four-year college degree ([Miles](#)). “According to the National Skills Coalition, middle-skills jobs (which require more than a high school education but less than a four-year degree) accounted for 56 percent of the Texas labor market in 2015, yet only 42 percent of the workforce was trained at that level” ([Kwong](#)).
- **Wraparound services:** Particularly for the predominant demographics involved with public programs, wrap-around services are essential. These services ensure that workforce trainees are not derailed by life events during the program.

Even so, significant gaps remain in our understanding of effective interventions. For one, even the most successful programs are not one-size-fits-all. Due to the varied traits of individuals receiving assistance, no one program intervention is perfectly suited to meet all individual needs. As a result, a better understanding of different program models and how they relate to individuals is needed. A second gap is the viability of these programs in successfully targeting actual welfare recipients—those who are most in need of training and services. A third roadblock for further study is the fact that so few randomized controlled trials exist on Texas workforce development programs. Indeed, this is a

problem nationally, as “evaluations are implemented with relatively few participants, use nonrandom samples from the population of interest, and are concentrated in the most populous urban areas and U.S. states” ([Ruder, 1](#)).

As for a policy agenda, one key lever could be to create stronger incentives for external evaluations of workforce program impacts—keeping organizations accountable for their results. Providing greater data access for researchers and more researcher-practitioner partnerships could be a first step. A national example of this is the Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, which establishes procedures for agencies to make data accessible and plan to develop statistical evidence to support policymaking ([H.R. 4174](#)). In a state example, Colorado set up data and evaluative guardrails for its ReHire program: “The state department shall ... evaluate

the outcomes of the transitional jobs program and present the results of its evaluation in a timely and structured manner” ([HB 13-1004, 7](#)). And in Indiana, the state has an agency, the Management Performance Hub, that links state administrative data across agencies and provides data access to researchers ([Indiana State Government](#)). Texas already has some of this infrastructure through the Texas Education Research Center, with a longitudinal database that links students from Texas schools to their education and labor market data.

In sum, more data is needed to determine how best to allocate scarce resources to help those in need. And broadly speaking, more evidence is required to make informed public policy decisions about best approaches in Texas to promoting self-sufficiency. ★

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