



# PEOPLE-CENTERED INFRASTRUCTURE





Infrastructure should be people-centered; built for the people, by the people.

**T**he pandemic has impacted every industry differently and each industry's trajectory out of this recession will look different. The experience of certain workers and local firms within each industry will differ as well. National Skills Coalition (NSC) and Business Leaders United (BLU) convened an Infrastructure Industry Recovery Panel of leading experts working in local communities. We wanted to learn what an effective, equitable, people-centered infrastructure plan should include. Panelists represent business, labor, education and training organizations, and others working in construction, utilities, transportation, and clean energy fields.

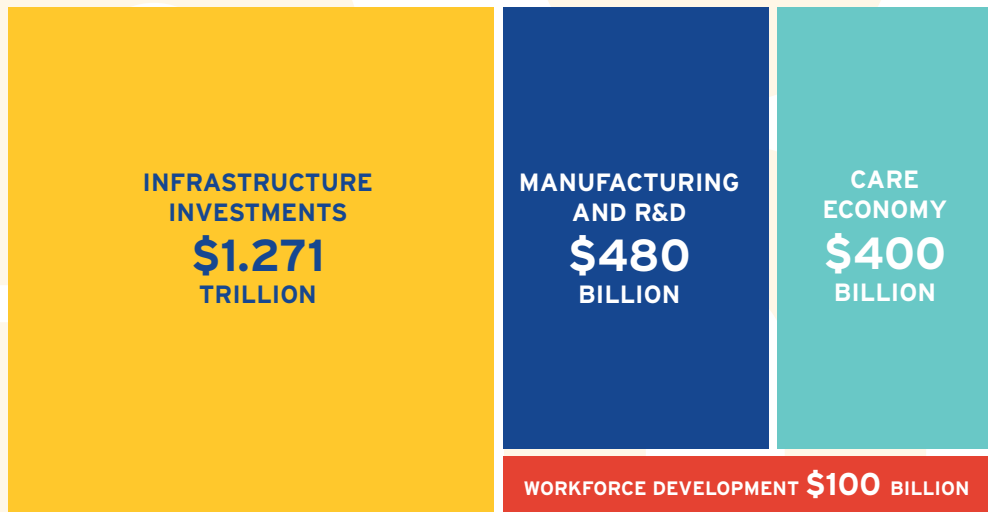
The need to invest in our nation's crumbling infrastructure goes back decades. But today, with more than 10 million people unemployed, there is unprecedented momentum to act. Women, immigrants, and people of color are disproportionately represented in these numbers as are young adults! President Joe Biden and Congress are counting on infrastructure investments to spur job creation and economic recovery.

Infrastructure should be people-centered; built for the people, by the people. Infrastructure policy must be people-centered as well. People-centered means investing in training and supports for workers displaced from hard hit industries. It means ensuring workers can train to repair roads and bridges, build schools, expand broadband, shore up our power grid and safe drinking water, restore our ports and airports, and expand public and energy efficient transportation.

On March 31, President Biden put forward the American Jobs Plan, which proposed billions of dollars in infrastructure investments and an explicit focus on racial equity. The President included a proposed \$100 billion investment in workforce development.

Economists Mark Zandi and Bernard Yaros of Moody's predict that the American Jobs Plan could recoup jobs lost during the recession and add an additional 13.5 million jobs by 2024.<sup>2</sup> They predict that most of the jobs created will require skills training, but not a college education. For this reason, they argue, "the funds in the [American Jobs Plan] for training will be important."<sup>3</sup>

### THE AMERICAN JOBS PLAN



1 According to the Century Foundation, by one month into the pandemic, one in four people between the ages of 20 and 24 were unemployed. See <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-covid-19-recession-is-hitting-young-workers-especially-young-workers-of-color-the-hardest/>

2 Mark Zandi and Bernard Yaros, "The Macroeconomic Consequences of the American Jobs Plan," Moody's Analytics, April 2021.

3 Catherine Clifford, "'Green' jobs in Biden's infrastructure bill: What they could pay and how to be eligible," CNBC Make It, April 12, 2021.

NSC and BLU interviewed individual panelists and convened the full Infrastructure Industry Recovery Panel for group discussions. Themes emerged about the pandemic's impact on the industry, as well as essential components of a people-centered, equitable infrastructure plan.

Prior to the pandemic, construction faced challenges hiring workers with the necessary training. A tight labor market, limited access to training, and racial and gender discrimination contributed to these challenges. Transportation sectors faced labor constraints in repair and maintenance, while major urban systems faced aging rail and bus stock. Like transportation, utilities faced the challenges of an aging, retiring workforce. An emerging alternative energy sector was still relatively small but growing. Across all sectors, digital skill demands grew as technological investments changed almost all occupations. These demands accelerated with lockdowns.

Industry leaders are excited by President Biden's proposed and much needed investments in infrastructure. They are concerned about adequate investments in skills training and support services. They recognize training will be necessary for millions of unemployed workers' transition into infrastructure jobs, particularly women, immigrants, and people of color, as well as young adults. These groups, hardest hit by the recession, are traditionally underrepresented in infrastructure fields. Industry leaders hope investments in training will also include incumbent workers. They see opportunities for women and people of color, who are concentrated in entry level utilities and transportation roles, to upskill into higher level positions.

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



### INCLUDE LOCAL RESIDENT TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT IN PLANS FOR FEDERAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Industry leaders are clear about three essential components of an infrastructure plan. First, a final infrastructure package must include resources to train local workers for the jobs it creates. Second, federal dollars should come with incentives for local plans that focus on training local workers for infrastructure contracts. Third, if federal administering agencies operate in silos, those silos will reproduce at the local level, hurting workers and businesses.

#### Recommendations:

- ▶ **Invest in people through the American Jobs Plan and American Family Plan.** Ensure the \$100 billion for workforce training in President Biden's American Jobs Plan (AJP) stays in the final infrastructure package. The President's American Families Plan (AFP) – a companion to AJP – includes expanded childcare and other essential work/training supports. Congress should make these investments. Additional essential investments outside of AJP and AFP are outlined throughout this brief.
- ▶ **Incentivize local investment in people.** Local officials developing plans and bidders' guidelines should incentivize the training of local workers in how they award contracts. Congress can encourage this in a final infrastructure plan. The U.S. Employment Plan – developed by Jobs to Move America and approved by the Department of Transportation – is a possible model for Congress. The plan encourages bidders to include workforce training and employment in the manufacture of trains and buses for federal projects.
- ▶ **Capacity investments are essential to local hire.** Sustainable, long-term investment is essential to local hire goals and building long-term talent pipelines. Community colleges and community training organizations do not have investment capital to rapidly scale up training equipment, space, or capacity in response to new infrastructure investments. The infrastructure plan must provide resources directly to training providers or require local contractors to make this investment.
- ▶ **Support local alignment through federal alignment.** Congress should not fund transportation and energy agencies to develop their own training programs. Instead, they should invest in their capacity to partner with labor, education, and human service agencies. These supply side agencies have expertise in delivering training and wrap-around supports and aligning funding. In addition, The White House should create a new Interagency Sub Taskforce on Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery to align federal skills investments. The Sub taskforce should include heads of key federal agencies. This includes the Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services as well as demand-side agencies engaged in job creation efforts like the Departments of Transportation, Energy, and Commerce.
- ▶ **Measure equitable outcomes.** Federal infrastructure investments should require reporting on hires, wages and industry-connected advancement of all workers employed on federally funded projects. Reporting should include race, gender, and whether those hired previously worked in that industry. These outcomes should be measured over time. There must also be investment in capacity to collect and report this data. Without this capacity, organizations that are highly successful in working with the community will be excluded.

## INVEST IN LOCAL CAPACITY TO DEVELOP LOCAL WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

Industry leaders need flexibility to craft local solutions and target resources based on the needs of local workers and employers. This requires sustained support for local industry partnerships. Previous federal discretionary programs like the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants, the POWER Initiative, or TIGER grants have built local capacity to support these partnerships. However, their vulnerability from one administration to the next has disrupted sustainable local workforce development ecosystems. Unpredictable funding has also limited their ability to respond to industry changes. In addition, these federal grant programs often failed to require the full set of local partners necessary to respond to both industry demand and worker need.

### Recommendation:

- ▶ **Require and invest in multi-stakeholder industry partnerships at the local level.** As part of any infrastructure plan, include funding for expanded, sustainable industry partnerships to support regional, industry specific training and hiring strategies. Industry partnerships are a proven multi-stakeholder approach. They help workers enter and advance along career pathways in key local or regional industries. They help local companies within an industry support an inclusive, talent ecosystem. Industry partnerships also address specific challenges identified by industry stakeholders. Examples include marketing infrastructure careers to young people, updating training curricula, and aligning essential support services.

## INVEST IN EQUITABLE INFRASTRUCTURE CAREER PATHWAYS

Achieving an equitable economic recovery and meeting industry demand for skilled workers requires a broad, inclusive hiring pipeline. Whether in the form of mandates or incentives, hiring targets can ensure jobs go to people in the community, particularly if they include explicit race and gender equity goals. But the impact of hiring targets is limited if they only lead to a short-term, entry level job. These immediate jobs should connect to additional training and equitable, longer-term pathways in the industry.

### Recommendations:

- ▶ **Authorize Infrastructure Professional Opportunity Grants (IPOG).** Building equitable career pathways requires targeting resources for training and supportive services to historically underrepresented groups in the industry. Congress can leverage and replicate the success of the Healthcare Professionals Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program for the infrastructure industry. HPOG has trained thousands of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and low-income

individuals for healthcare occupations that pay well. Congress should authorize a new Infrastructure Professional Opportunity Grant program.

- ▶ **Pass the bipartisan SKILL UP Act.** Building equitable infrastructure career pathways requires employer investment in upskilling entry level workers. Congress should empower businesses to invest in skills training opportunities for workers who need it the most. The SKILL UP Act expands the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. It provides an increased credit for businesses that invest in work-based learning opportunities. SKILL UP supports hiring and upskilling workers who have historically been excluded from long-term, infrastructure careers.
- ▶ **Fund integrated education and training to build foundational skills.** Many individuals seeking to enter infrastructure careers will need support to build basic academic skills. These include English language, math, and digital literacy skills. Under an integrated education and training model (IET), participants receive simultaneous instruction in basic skills as well as training for a specific occupation or industry. Congress should provide dedicated funding to support state or local implementation of IET through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Higher Education Act.
- ▶ **Support equity and inclusion for labor and business.** Racial and gender bias within unions and businesses has excluded women and people of color from infrastructure jobs. Building equitable infrastructure career pathways requires dismantling bias. Federal infrastructure investments should target support to sector partnerships to help employers, unions, and training providers adopt and measure equitable, inclusive practices.

## EXPAND SHORT-TERM TRAINING AND FLEXIBLE APPRENTICESHIP

Infrastructure investments will create demand for rapid, short-term training and upskilling. The industry needs policymakers to dramatically expand access to high-quality, short-term training in traditional training settings and at community colleges. This short-term training can lead to an immediate job or support a promotion. It can also help a person quickly develop baseline skills to enter longer-term apprenticeship.

Industry leaders also want to see apprenticeship expanded with a renewed focus on high-quality programs. This includes reinforcing the importance of Registered Apprenticeship and other work-based learning strategies, while reducing the administrative burdens of apprenticeship. Industry leaders also stress the importance of child-care, transportation, and other supports to apprenticeship expansion.

## Recommendations:

- ▶ **Pass the bipartisan JOBS Act to expand access to high-quality, short-term training.** Congress should expand federal financial aid to high-quality, short-term training programs that help workers rapidly reskill or upskill. The JOBS Act would expand access to Pell grants to ensure more workers can access short-term programs. The JOBS Act includes strong quality assurance provisions. For example, training must be aligned with state or local employer requirements; an accrediting agency must evaluate programs for quality and student outcomes; and a program must satisfy any applicable prerequisites for professional licensure or certification. In addition, the JOBS Act excludes proprietary institutions.
- ▶ **Expand apprenticeship and work-based learning through the bipartisan BUILDS Act.** Congress should pass the BUILDS Act. The BUILDS Act supports employers, education and training providers, labor unions, and workforce boards working together to train workers. The bill funds pre-employment training, transportation, career counseling and other supports that help people succeed in apprenticeship and work-based learning programs.

## HELP INFRASTRUCTURE WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS ADOPT AND ADAPT TO NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The pandemic accelerated the need for new workplace technologies and the demand for digital skills. Industry leaders need support to help new and incumbent workers build foundational digital skills. Workers need access to foundational digital skills that serve as a baseline for adapting to ongoing technological change. They also need access to training that develops higher-level industry- and job-specific digital skills. Data confirm industry leaders' perspectives: 22 percent of currently employed U.S. workers in infrastructure related fields have no digital skills. An additional 28 percent have very limited skills.<sup>4</sup>

Employers also need support adopting new technologies. But there is currently little investment in supporting the infrastructure industry, particularly small and mid-sized employers, in adopting new technologies and adapting to technological change. The manufacturing industry has the Commerce Department's Manufacturing Extension Partnerships (MEPs) to facilitate the adoption of new technologies and innovations. A similar, federally funded network of state-based partnerships could support small and mid-sized companies in the infrastructure industry that need reasonably priced assistance.

## Recommendations:

- ▶ **Pass the bipartisan Digital Equity Act and Invest in new Digital Literacy Upskilling Grants.** Through the bipartisan Digital Equity Act, Congress should make a dedicated investment to help states pursue digital inclusion and skill building through \$1 billion in new funding. This should include formula funding for all states to support capacity-building and digital equity planning, and a competitive grant program to invest in best practices and spur innovation among states. Congress should also make a federal commitment to occupational digital literacy through a new national grant program. These new Digital Literacy Upskilling Grants would expand access to high quality digital skills instruction that meets industry and worker needs.
- ▶ **Develop a measurable national standard for industry-specific digital upskilling efforts.** Congress should define and embed occupational digital literacy in workforce and education policies like Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I and II. This should be backed by funding to support quality digital skills training through existing policies as well as the new Digital Literacy Upskilling Grants.
- ▶ **Create an Infrastructure Extension Partnership program to help local companies adopt new technologies.** Congress should authorize the Department of Commerce to develop new cross-agency collaboration with the Departments of Labor, Education, Transportation, Energy and Environmental Protection Agency and fund a new network of 21st Century Extension Partnerships (based on MEPs but expanded into other industries).

## SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY OUTCOMES BEYOND BRICKS, MORTAR, AND JOBS

It bears repeating: Infrastructure should be by the people, for the people. The success of a massive federal infrastructure investment should be measured by the roads that get repaired, the schools that get built, the growth in clean energy use. Success should be measured by the number of community members who obtain career path employment. But success should be measured by so much more, including a range of sustainable community outcomes. These include useability and accessibility of infrastructure projects, growth in community wealth building, boosts to local supply chains, expansion of entrepreneurship, and improved community health outcomes. Members of the Infrastructure Industry Recover Panel are experts on how Congress can support achievement of these essential community benefit outcomes.

<sup>4</sup> National Skills Coalition, Construction and transportation workers need investment in their digital skills. December 2020. Available at <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Digital-Skills-Const-and-trans-final.pdf>



This brief is written by National Skills Coalition and Business Leaders United with input from members of our Infrastructure Industry Recovery Panel. A list of panelists can be found at <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/industryrecoverypanels/>. We would like to thank the panelists for generously sharing their time, knowledge, and insight. The views expressed in this report are an aggregation of what we heard and do not necessarily reflect the views of each individual advisory panel member or the organizations they represent.

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