

Wow, WIOA!

New opportunities to advance economic mobility

By Hannah Halbert

Moving someone off of public assistance programs and into work will not necessarily move them out of poverty. In Ohio, most families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level are working. Many of those working families need help affording health insurance, childcare, heat and food. Reducing the number of people receiving public assistance does not mean people are attaining self-sufficiency. Removing people from public assistance when they have little or no other income will likely push families to other more expensive programs like children's services and shelters. This won't really help families, our state budget, or our economy. Rather, the state should be asking how could these public systems better serve low-skilled, low-income adults so they can achieve not just self-sufficiency but real economic mobility.

A new federal statute, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act has solid plans to help the workers who struggle most in Ohio's job market. By emphasizing education and training, focusing on career pathways and apprenticeships, and incorporating a better understanding of the labor market, this act, known as WIOA for short, could transform the worker training and placement system for those who face significant barriers to employment. Ohio is also launching the Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program, which seeks to align workforce and public assistance dollars to support stronger case management and better connections to work. This report details several policies that will help the state take advantage of these new approaches. The recommendations support three big themes:

- 1) Make economic mobility, not just employment or reducing the number of public assistance recipients, the goal of these emerging programs, and engage in deep strategic planning across programs and at the service delivery level.
- 2) Prioritize education and training for people with employment barriers, especially people near exhaustion of cash benefits. This means actively reducing policy barriers that limit education and training hours and increasing funding for policies that support persistence.
- 3) Focus on job quality. Too many jobs pay too little, have no benefits, or require irregular schedules. The public sector, particularly the workforce development system, must do more to encourage high-road employment practices. Training and education will not help families move forward if jobs don't offer fair pay for those skills.

Ohio policy must move away from business as usual, if the state wants to build pathways to economic security. These recommendations can build a new policy foundation. For Ohio workers who face barrier to employment and a tough job market, it's essential that we all deliver.