

Abstract: Workforce Innovation Fund Application

Applicant Name: Baltimore County Department of Economic Development, Division of Workforce Development (DWD)

Applicant Category: Consortium of WIBs

Lead Applicant City/State: Baltimore County, Department of Economic Development, Division of Workforce Development (DWD), Towson, Maryland

Areas Served: Austin, TX; Atlanta, GA; New Haven, CT; Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Montgomery, Prince George's, Queen Anne's, and Talbot counties, MD and City of Baltimore, MD.

Project Name: The Accelerating Connections to Employment (ACE) Initiative

Funding Level Requested: Total grant - \$11,879,725 (\$9,569,061 for technical costs and \$2,300,664 for evaluation)

Project Type (*A, B, or C*): Type C

Description of Proposed Project: The Accelerating Connections to Employment (ACE) Initiative is a four-state, nine-workforce investment board (WIB) effort to expand and improve skill-building opportunities and outcomes for a priority population within the workforce system. The initiative targets low-skilled job seekers, including individuals with limited English proficiency and individuals with low reading, writing and math skills. Currently, low-skilled job seekers find it challenging to access the occupational training and supports they require for several reasons. The availability of programs that address students' basic skills needs within occupational programs is limited; those with low basic skills do not qualify for many occupational programs; and regulations and performance measures within the workforce system emphasize placement of individuals into high-wage, high-skill jobs that are beyond the reach of low-skilled job seekers. In addition, the support services and resources designed to help low-skilled individuals overcome personal barriers to going to school and working are fragmented among agencies inside and outside the workforce system.

The ACE Initiative has two major innovation strategies. The first is to introduce or scale up programs in the nine partner communities modeled on Washington State's highly-regarded

Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program. This project will build on Maryland's year of experience implementing an I-BEST-like program at six community colleges, and on Austin Community College's experience with a similar model. These accelerated, integrated "ACE programs" will incorporate basic skills, occupational skills, soft skills, and job readiness training; support services; an optional internship or clinical placement; job placement support; and long-term career navigation. Each ACE program will prepare job-seekers for high-demand occupations that offer a career pathway. Healthcare is the primary sectoral focus for this project. In consultation with employer partners, each WIB will target at least one healthcare occupation and may choose an additional high-demand occupation for which to develop ACE programs. ACE programs will enroll between 1,200 and 1,600 students over the life of the grant; 75 percent of enrollees will complete; 75 percent of completers will find employment paying \$9-\$15 per hour, depending on local economies; 80 and 70 percent of those placed will remain employed at six and twelve months after placement, respectively. Local areas may focus efforts on particular low-skilled subpopulations including, for example, TANF recipients, non-custodial parents, immigrants, or youth aging out of foster care.

The second strategy is to implement systems innovations. Across the nine workforce investment areas there is wide variation in the degree of coordination among agencies and organizations serving low-skilled individuals. WIBs will bring these entities in as partners, in an effort to streamline and better coordinate services and funding. Partners include community colleges to deliver the ACE programs and collaborate on assessment, coaching, and job placement activities; employers to provide information on labor market demand and skills needs, host internships and consider graduates for available job opportunities; and other public agencies and community-based organizations to refer and support participants and identify additional resources as

available. To facilitate cooperation, partners will develop and implement, as appropriate, common recruitment, assessment, case management, and data management tools.

Description of Proposed Evaluation Strategy: To advance evidence-based policymaking, the ACE Initiative will use an impact analysis paired with an implementation analysis to measure the effects of the program on the target population across the initiative and to seek explanations for some of the differences in implementation, outcomes, and impacts across the sites. The impact analysis will compare outcomes for low-skilled individuals who received ACE services through their local WIB with those of similar individuals served by the same WIB who did not receive ACE services. Participants and comparison group members will be matched using a propensity score matching approach. Evaluators will assess impacts of the ACE Initiative on: credential attainment, job placement, job retention, earnings, job quality, public assistance receipt, and the likelihood of accessing additional training. Data collection will include: state wage record data to assess employment, employment retention, and earnings; program data from WIBs and partner organizations to learn about demographics, service levels, and credential attainment; and baseline and follow-up surveys with ACE participants and comparison group members to understand less quantifiable impacts on participants' lives. The implementation analysis will include field visits; analysis of program data and materials; interviews and focus groups with WIBs, partner organizations, employers, and participants; observations of program activities; and collection of local-level data. Overall, this evaluation should enable the field to assess how much further low-skilled clients can progress with the customized, intensive, and comprehensive services provided by the ACE program, relative to similar job seekers who do not have access to these services, and what it takes to achieve impacts in different local contexts.

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