

Implementing the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act in Illinois

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is a unique opportunity to help steer the state out of the recession, build a skilled workforce and improve employment opportunities for people living in poverty. The Chicago Jobs Council believes that there are four key priorities in order for the implementation of workforce initiatives under ARRA to effectively reach underserved communities and low-income people in our state.

1. Integrate workforce strategies with economic development investments.

ARRA directs states and localities to connect workforce initiatives to the jobs created by infrastructure investments. Opportunities for training and jobs exist in transportation, energy investments and weatherization programs. The significant increase in funding for weatherization programs is an opportunity to build better pathways into the construction industry. Moreover the state's capital investments through both ARRA and state sources can include investments in *human* capital by setting aside a portion of infrastructure funding for training and workforce initiatives.

2. Partner with community-based organizations to build capacity quickly and ensure access to low-income individuals.

ARRA directs states and localities to spend funding quickly and effectively. In order for workforce development and training capacity to grow, community-based providers must be partners in implementation strategies. In addition, ARRA provisions that apply to federal Workforce Investment Act funds prioritize low-income individuals and people moving off of public assistance. Community-based providers are uniquely situated across the state to help ensure access to services for those individuals. Moreover, using ARRA funds for support services strategies (such as transportation and childcare) will ensure that more low-income individuals can take advantage of skills training and education opportunities.

3. Combine paid work experience with skills training when unemployment remains high.

The workforce focus under ARRA is to train and upgrade the skills of as many individuals as possible. But, as unemployment continues to increase and the job market weakens, skill building strategies should be combined with paid work experiences in order to alleviate the lack of income from sustained unemployment. A number of existing strategies—transitional jobs, wage subsidies, on-the-job training, and paid internships—can be expanded to provide work opportunities at the same time as individuals are participating in training programs.

4. Use existing workforce strategies to expand capacity quickly and effectively

As ARRA implementation proceeds, the state and localities should use existing programs and strategies that are effective at providing workforce and skill-building opportunities to low-income individuals. These include: the Employment Opportunity Grant Program and the Job Training and Economic Development Program administered by the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity; “bridge” pilots conducted by community colleges and community-based training entities across the state; and transitional jobs programs administered by the Department of Corrections and the Department of Human Services.