

19 Ways to Expand and Improve Apprenticeships



Curran McSwigan

Economic Policy Advisor

[@Curran_McSwigan](https://twitter.com/Curran_McSwigan)

Monumental legislative accomplishments—from producing semiconductors to laying down broadband to building electric vehicles—will unlock a whole new economy for the non-college workforce. Amid these opportunities, however, lies one massive challenge: finding workers with the skills needed to execute these investments. For example, electricians will be essential in the transition to renewable energy, but a third of all union electricians are at or near retirement age.¹ By 2030, there is expected to be as many as 2 million unfilled manufacturing jobs because workers will lack the necessary skills.² And, right now, nearly 100 million Americans don't have access to a primary care physician in large part because of health care worker shortages.³

One solution is right in front of us. A massive expansion of the earn-and-learn model of apprenticeships. More apprenticeships are key to solving these challenges, providing workers with pathways to good jobs while supporting innovation and growth in the economy. Below we outline 19 different policy ideas to expand and improve apprenticeships.

Help more people start and finish an apprenticeship program.

Although access to high-quality training programs greatly improves job outcomes, low-income youth continue to face significant hurdles to sustainable employment. Black apprentices are much less likely to finish an apprenticeship program after enrolling than their white peers, while barriers such as a lack of child care keep many women from enrolling at all. ⁴ To combat these trends, policymakers should:

- Create an Apprenticeship Support Voucher to help offset the financial hurdles that prevent workers from participating and succeeding in apprenticeship programs. ⁵
- Increase funding for data to better understand what hurdles prevent apprentices from completing programs, with particular attention to understand what these systemic barriers are for workers of color. ⁶

Expand access to apprenticeships to more workers.

Almost 80% of apprentices in registered programs are white and just 13% are women. ⁷ To increase apprenticeship opportunities for underrepresented groups, Congress should:

- Increase funding for the Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) program, which provides grants to community-based organizations working to increase the recruitment, training, and retention of women in fields where they are underrepresented, such as traditional trade industries.
- Invest in expanding apprenticeship opportunities in more female-dominated sectors such as health care and education. This could include support for degree apprenticeship models, which provide structured on-the-job training alongside classroom instruction, in fields like teaching, where associate's or bachelor's degrees are required. ⁸ As well, policymakers could establish specific grant funding for new apprenticeship programs in the health care sector. ⁹
- Expand pre-apprenticeship programs, which provide a critical on-ramp to apprenticeships and can increase overall awareness on these non-college pathways and help underrepresented groups better meet entry requirements. ¹⁰ This can include piloting pre-apprenticeship programs specifically for persons with disabilities and women, better integrating community organizations in the pre-apprenticeship system, and targeting diverse populations in outreach efforts. ¹¹
- Increase wrap-around services such as child care, funds for equipment and tools, mentorship programs, subsidized transportation, and access to other support networks, which are found to be critical to the long-term success of underrepresented populations in apprenticeships. ¹²

- Offer tax incentives to employers who sponsor apprenticeships for persons with disabilities. Several states, from New York to Tennessee, have already successfully piloted similar tax credit programs.¹³
- Provide technical assistance to workforce boards and local communities regarding recruitment strategies to better focus on equity and inclusion, as well as offer support on best practices for housing inclusive apprenticeship programs.¹⁴

Make the registered apprenticeship program easier for employers to navigate.

The registered apprenticeship program is cumbersome and hard to navigate for employers, with 42% of businesses saying they have experienced challenges throughout the process.¹⁵ To reduce these bottlenecks, Congress should:

- Call on the Department of Labor (DoL) to establish a “frequent flyer” program to fast-track the registration process for participating employers that have a track record of approved, high-quality programs that achieve benchmark results.
- Require greater levels of federal-state coordination to ensure that the registration process is centralized and consistent across the country.

Enlist small and medium-sized businesses in the effort.

Smaller businesses struggle to launch and sustain apprenticeship programs due to limited resources and capacity. To alleviate these challenges, policymakers should:

- Provide employers with loans or grants up to \$10,000 for each new apprentice they hire; loans could be partially forgiven under certain circumstances.
- Direct the DoL to provide better technical assistance support to businesses setting up new apprenticeship programs.
- Facilitate the creation of partnerships between small businesses with similar apprenticeship needs, with the goal of sharing costs for program design, outreach, and recruitment.¹⁶

Strengthen ties between employers, communities, and apprentices.

Across the apprenticeship system, state agencies, community organizations, unions, employers, and more all work together to develop training. To best support stronger ties between these groups, policymakers should:

- Pass the Apprenticeship Hubs Across America Act, which would create apprenticeship hubs in all 50 states. These hubs would build on the already successful model of apprenticeship intermediaries that provide a vital link between employers, educators, apprentices, and community organizations.¹⁷
- Create flexible state block grants to expand these apprenticeship hubs and allow regions to best accommodate their workforces.
- Increase funding to make American Job Centers (AJCs), which are one-stop shops for jobseekers seeking crucial services, to be more accessible through partnerships with community centers (e.g., libraries) and by expanding capacity for more one-on-one career counseling, digital skills training, transportation for job seekers, and more.

Help prison lead to a profession.

Job-specific training programs such as apprenticeships increase the likelihood of post-release employment by 30% for justice-involved individuals.¹⁸ To strengthen the prison-based apprenticeship program, Congress should:

- Increase funding for prison-based programs through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and create jail-based American Job Centers that cultivate better connections with prospective employers.¹⁹
- Raise wages for apprentices in prison to increase completion rates and create better connections to post-release employment opportunities.²⁰
- Encourage prison-based apprenticeship programs to seek labor market input so that programs keep pace with industry needs and also align employers' needs with workers skills.²¹

ENDNOTES

1. Ramkumar, Amrith. "America is Trying to Electrify. There Aren't Enough Electricians." *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 Feb. 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-is-trying-to-electrify-there-arent-enough-electricians-4260d05b>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
2. "2.1 Million Manufacturing Jobs Could Go Unfilled by 2030." *NAM News*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.nam.org/2-1-million-manufacturing-jobs-could-go-unfilled-by-2030-13743/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
3. McAuliff, Michael. "Fixing the health care worker shortage may be something Congress can agree on." *NPR*, 22 Feb. 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/02/22/1158026497/fixing-the-health-care-worker-shortage-may-be-something-congress-can-agree-on>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
4. Colborn, John and Nneka Jenkins. "Recasting American Apprenticeship: A Summary of the Barriers to Apprenticeship Expansion Research project." 15, Nov. 2015, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/recasting-american-apprenticeship/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023. And; Jones, Janelle, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez and Christopher DeCarlo. "Equity Snapshot: Apprenticeships in America." U.S. Department of Labor, 4 Nov. 2021, <https://blog.dol.gov/2021/11/03/equity-snapshot-apprenticeships-in-america>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023. And; Allen, Lili and Michael Sack. "Connecting Apprenticeships to the Young People Who Need Them Most: The Role of Community-Based Organizations." *Jobs for the Future*, 5 Mar. 2019, <https://www.jff.org/resources/connecting-apprenticeships-young-people-who-need-them-most-role-community-based-organizations/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023. And; White, Taylor. "Youth Apprenticeship: A Strategy for Recovery and Resilience." *New America*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/youth-apprenticeship-strategy-recovery-and-resilience/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
5. Berkowitz, Kelsey. "How a Biden Administration Can Guarantee Apprenticeships For All." *Third Way*, 19 Nov. 2020, <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/how-a-biden-administration-can-guarantee-apprenticeships-for-all>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
6. Jones, Janelle, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez and Christopher DeCarlo. "Equity Snapshot: Apprenticeships in America." U.S. Department of Labor, 4 Nov. 2021, <https://blog.dol.gov/2021/11/03/equity-snapshot-apprenticeships-in-america>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
7. "Women in Apprenticeship." *Webpage*, Apprenticeship USA, <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/diversity-equity-inclusion-accessibility/women-in-apprenticeship>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023. And; Jones, Janelle, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez and Christopher DeCarlo. "Equity Snapshot: Apprenticeships in America." U.S. Department of Labor, 4 Nov. 2021, <https://blog.dol.gov/2021/11/03/equity-snapshot-apprenticeships-in-america>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
8. White, Taylor and Amaya Garcia. "Teacher Apprenticeship: What is it and Why Now?" *New America*, 8 Feb. 2022, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/teacher-apprenticeship-what-is-it-and-why-now/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.

9. Love, Ivy and Mary Alice McCarthy. "Apprenticeship and the Future of Nursing." *Center on Education & Labor Education Policy*. New America, 6 Sep. 2018. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/apprenticeship-and-future-nursing/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
10. Yager, Sophia. "State Strategies to Foster Inclusive Apprenticeships for People with Disabilities." National Governors Association. 11 Oct. 2022, <https://www.nga.org/news/commentary/state-strategies-to-foster-inclusive-apprenticeships-for-people-with-disabilities/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
11. Kuehn, Daniel et al. "Inclusive Apprenticeship: A Summary of What We Know About Apprentices with Disabilities." Urban Institute, 20 May 2021. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/inclusive-apprenticeship>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
12. "Creating more Equitable Pathways to Good Jobs." *Office of Public Affairs*, U.S. Department of Labor, 19 Jan. 2023, <https://blog.dol.gov/2023/01/19/creating-more-equitable-pathways-to-good-jobs>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
13. Yager, Sophia. "State Strategies to Foster Inclusive Apprenticeships for People with Disabilities." National Governors Association. 11 Oct. 2022, <https://www.nga.org/news/commentary/state-strategies-to-foster-inclusive-apprenticeships-for-people-with-disabilities/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
14. Colborn, John and Nneka Jenkins. "Recasting American Apprenticeship: A Summary of the Barriers to Apprenticeship Expansion Research project." 15, Nov. 2015, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/recasting-american-apprenticeship/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023. And; Cheney, Gretchen. "Growing Equity and Diversity Through Apprenticeship: Business Perspectives." *Jobs for the Future*, 3 Sep. 2019, <https://www.jff.org/resources/growing-equity-and-diversity-through-apprenticeship-business-perspectives/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
15. Colborn, John and Nneka Jenkins. "Recasting American Apprenticeship: A Summary of the Barriers to Apprenticeship Expansion Research project." 15, Nov. 2015, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/recasting-american-apprenticeship/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
16. Goger, Annelies, Chenoah Sinclair, and Aaliyah Dick. "An apprenticeship FAQ: What employers need to know about talent development." Brookings Institution, 1 Mar. 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/an-apprenticeship-faq-what-employers-need-to-know-about-talent-development/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
17. Amoyaw, May and David Brown. "Apprenticeship America: An Idea to Reinvent Postsecondary Skills for the Digital Age." *Third Way*, 11 Jun. 2018, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/apprenticeship-america-an-idea-to-reinvent-postsecondary-skills-for-the-digital-age>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
18. McGrew, Annie and Angela Hanks. "The Case for Paid Apprenticeships Behind Bars." *Center for American Progress*, 27 Apr. 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/case-paid-apprenticeships-behind-bars/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.

- 19.** Galeano, Sergio. “Bolstering the Prison-Based Apprenticeship and Workforce Training System.” Third Way, 31 Aug. 2021, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/bolstering-the-prison-based-apprenticeship-and-workforce-training-system>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
- 20.** Hecker, Ian and Daniel Kuehn. “Apprenticeship and the Justice System: Adapting a Proven Training Model to Serve People in Prison.” Urban Institute, 22 Feb. 2019, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/apprenticeship-and-justice-system>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.
- 21.** Hecker, Ian and Daniel Kuehn. “Apprenticeship and the Justice System: Adapting a Proven Training Model to Serve People in Prison.” Urban Institute, 22 Feb. 2019, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/apprenticeship-and-justice-system>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2023.