

**CT Employment and Training Commission Submission in Response
to the Career Pathways Request for Information (Docket ED-2014-OVAE-0044-0002)
Issued by the federal Departments of Education, Labor and Health and Human Services**

Introduction

The Connecticut Employment and Training Commission (CETC) is the State Workforce Investment Board. CETC provides workforce-related policy and planning guidance to Governor Malloy and the Connecticut General Assembly to promote coordination of workforce-related investments, strategies and programs. Appointed by the Governor, CETC members represent businesses, key state agencies, regional/local entities, organized labor, community-based organizations and other stakeholders. The Office of Workforce Competitiveness (OWC) acts as workforce policy advisor to the Governor and provides technical assistance and support to CETC. OWC, on the CETC's behalf, coordinated this response to the request from the US Departments of Education, Health and Human Services to provide a broad, statewide perspective on career pathways system efforts in Connecticut.

Information in this paper derives from several sources. Members of two key CETC committees – Career Advancement, and Youth Employment, respectively – participated in a joint working session to share insights on the questions asked in the RFI. An information session was held with officials coordinating career pathways efforts in the state's public college and university system. Finally, a brief survey was disseminated to key stakeholders asking for input on the challenges and opportunities associated with career pathway efforts. Collectively the knowledgeable individuals who were engaged in our information gathering process represent employers, Workforce Investment Boards, key state agencies, community colleges, adult education providers, Regional Education Service Centers, community-based service providers and philanthropy.

In addition, over the last two years CETC committees investigated and promoted adoption of promising career pathway strategies for youth and adults, and practical outcome measures. In 2013, the Youth Employment Committee produced *Career Pathways System: Report to the Connecticut Employment and Training Commission*. In 2014, the Career Advancement Committee produced *A Review of Contextualized Learning and Its Importance to Career Advancement for Adults in Connecticut*. Insights from those reports are reflected in this paper.

Connecticut's response focuses on several key questions raised in the RFI including current efforts to support career pathways, the challenges in implementing career pathway programs and systems, the provision of services to diverse populations, and recommendations for how the federal, state and local governments can support career pathways efforts.

Connecticut Experience

Connecticut has an unofficial network of entities, including the State Departments of Labor, Education, Social Services, and Economic and Community Development, the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, five Regional Workforce Investment Boards and community based organizations, in its extensive workforce development system (a "system of systems") that collaborate informally to support career pathways efforts. Each of these stakeholders can point to examples of projects featuring many of the principles listed by the federal agencies in their definition of career pathway systems. Connecticut can point to examples of exemplary, innovative, career pathways-oriented efforts in the state, many ongoing and sustained over time in many cases with competitive grants offered by the federal agencies involved in this RFI.

Connecticut programs strive to provide the essential components of a comprehensive career pathways system outlined by the federal departments: alignment across program and "sub-

system” silos; rigorous, sequential coursework integrating education and training; flexible entry/exit; comprehensive support services; financial support; engagement of targeted business sectors; credit for prior learning/accelerated advancement; flexible scheduling; innovative technology; industry-recognized credentials; industry sector focus and advancement opportunities; and, collaboration among stakeholders to achieve results.

Connecticut examples of programs that embrace these essential components include but are not limited to:

- Connecticut’s Community Colleges received two USDOL Community-Based Job Training three-year grants in 2005 and 2007. Both projects focused on targeted advising for health careers and include a joint initiative with the Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) to provide a dedicated Health Career Advisor in each region. The CT Community Colleges implemented a Health Career Pathways Certificate Program, career pathway and advising tools and a health education and career website.
- Four of the state’s community colleges have established Advanced Manufacturing Centers with state bond funding that provide career pathways beginning with entry-level non-credit courses and certificates through the associate degree level with formal articulations to bachelor’s degree programs.
- The Center for New Media at Middlesex Community College in Middletown, CT offers innovative associate degrees in broadcast-cinema, multimedia, graphic design, and communication, as well as job-based certificate programs in areas such as interactive entertainment, gaming, 3D animation, new media production, news and sports production, corporate media and web design.
- Four Workforce Investment Boards and the City of New Haven, respectively, operate Jobs Funnels that prepare low skilled adults for career pathways in construction and energy industries in collaboration with community based organizations and labor unions.

- With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Workforce Alliance, the South Central CT WIB, is partnering with Gateway Community College and the CT League for Nursing to implement and sustain the Fast-Track LPN to RN Initiative to promote career pathways in healthcare.
- Capital Workforce Partners, the North Central Workforce Investment Board, with funding from the Aspen Institute, is leading an Opportunity Youth Collaborative to bring youth providers together to support a career pathways framework in the region.
- New London Adult Education in collaboration with the Eastern CT Workforce Investment Board, CT Departments of Labor and Education and local employers is providing enhanced education and training in allied health, hospitality and service industries for low skilled adults.
- Connecticut Center for Arts and Technology (CONNCAT) offers adult learner programs in the healthcare industry. The programs prepare students to earn healthcare credentials while also addressing math and literacy. Basic skills are addressed during assessment and math instructors and literacy tutors are readily available. In addition to educational support, CONNCAT offers career development activities, life skills and financial literacy workshops, intensive learner evaluation and support and placement assistance.
- Our Piece of the Pie, a nonprofit community based organization, is offering career pathway programs for youth in manufacturing, finance and healthcare in collaboration with local community colleges. The program helps participants to earn certificates and credentials and secure employment.

Recognizing the value of the career pathway programs, Connecticut state agencies and various local philanthropies have been investing in contextualized learning strategies as a way to support career pathways. In FY 2012-2013, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) invested \$240,000 in Program Improvement Project (PIP) grants specifically to implement I-BEST contextualized learning programs. PIP grants, totaling \$4.5 million in Federal funds through Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, provide opportunities to expand and im-

prove educational programs and services for adults lacking basic skills and literacy necessary to be effective parents, citizens and employees. CSDE first piloted I-BEST in 2010 with two years of incentive funding, and continues to direct WIA Title II resources to support the educational aspects of training. In addition to these Federal funds, several local philanthropic entities, such as the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, have invested significant funding to pilot and expand contextualized learning programs in various communities across the state.

The Connecticut Department of Labor has allocated state resources to pilot I-BEST programs and services for Jobs First Employment Services customers (TANF participants) through the five Workforce Investment Boards. Implementation began in December 2013. The State appropriation designated for these I-BEST pilots is \$1,548,300 for FY 2014 and \$1,367,900 for FY 2015.

Additionally, Connecticut is one of few states with a state and locally supported annual allocation of resources for adult education, totaling more than \$40 million in the current fiscal year. These programs serve the triple purpose of helping individuals get their high school diploma, achieve citizenship and gain proficiency with the English language.

Connecticut's legislature has also allocated \$30 million to the Subsidized Training and Employment Program (Step Up). Implemented by the Connecticut Department of Labor and the state's five Workforce Investment Boards, the program supports the hiring and/or training of unemployed workers by small businesses. More than seven hundred employers have taken advantage of the Step Up Program, hiring more than 2300 new workers.

These resources have established strong program level infrastructure and generated significant practical program experience that can serve as a base for future expansion. However, taking

best practices to scale systematically to maximize career advancement outcomes, particularly for diverse populations, is challenging.

Challenges to implementing career pathways strategies

One of the greatest challenges to building and sustaining career pathway efforts that Connecticut faces is the dependence on individual leaders at all levels. We need to institutionalize best practices that can persist despite inevitable administrative, managerial, and political leadership changes.

In addition, too often “partnership” is on paper, rhetorical, vs. practiced in reality. Partnership efforts lack the funding and time to build deep relationships between organizations targeted to a common outcome. The fact that providers operate under different funding mechanisms and with different eligibility requirements and outcome measurements also makes career pathway partnerships difficult.

The federal agencies that released this RFI are well aware of the challenges that diverse populations encounter in trying to secure and advance in their careers. Connecticut’s service providers have extensive experience in offering opportunities for youth and adults with employment barriers to build their skills. These populations include individuals that are English language learners, ex-offenders, high school dropouts, long term unemployed, and welfare recipients, to name a few. CETC Committee members noted that the group of jobseekers “in the middle” – neither hardest-to-serve (who are eligible for certain funding) nor job-ready (who need only modest support/intervention) – would benefit most from effective career pathways efforts.

Other key barriers to implementing career pathways strategies in Connecticut included:

Financial barriers

- Insufficient funding (from all sources) limits the ability to take effective practices to scale and to sustain them. Prospective students' demand for services overwhelms available resources and capacity of programs and services across the state ("the system") to respond. Additional effective programs and services are needed to meet demand.
- Most program funding has categorical strings limiting flexibility, innovation and responsiveness. As a result, most programs are unable to change as circumstances warrant.
- Effective contextualized learning programs are expensive on a unit cost basis and therefore have limited potential impact, given constrained funding realities.

Participant barriers

- The very low literacy levels of many prospective participants of career pathways programs – compounded by lack of work-readiness ("soft") skills – limit their prospects and tax the capabilities of programs with inadequate resources.
- Young people involved with the juvenile justice system are at-risk of future involvement with the criminal justice system as adults. Criminal records are a practical impediment to employment for youth and adults who aspire to productive careers.
- Performance requirements too often are not realistic, given the nature of the hard-to-serve populations most programs deal with therefore encouraging "creaming".

System barriers

- Career pathways efforts depend too heavily on individual leadership at the agency or program-level, rather than as a systemic imperative. There is a lack of clear, overarching responsibility and accountability for career pathways strategy, investments and results.
- The typical 10-12 week adult education class schedule is not enough time to make an impact. Typically participants in these programs confront multiple challenges.
- Currently used assessment tools and strategies are inadequate. In order to match participants to effective service strategies, more detailed information is needed. In particular,

clinical assessments of prospective candidates are critical, but prohibitively expensive, and well beyond available resources of most programs.

- There is a lack of quality program standards to drive funding decisions. Without these standards, limited available resources are not systematically invested-in programs that “achieve results” or in industries that really have jobs.
- Most providers report to different agencies and are accountable for differing outcome measures. For maximum impact the various components of a career pathways system need to share commitment to, and be held accountable for, achieving shared outcomes.
- Fragmented, inconsistent staffing – due to low wages and unpredictable funding – is a major program quality challenge for many nonprofit organizations providing employment-related services.
- Need better assessments of employers’ needs, realistic progression from job-to-job along a career pathway, and employer commitment to support productive workers’ efforts to pursue a career advancement strategy.
- The capacity of organizations to respond to the complexity of braiding funds including reporting, procurement, etc. is inadequate.

Recommendations for federal, state and local government

Connecticut stakeholders recognize that it takes effort at the federal, state and local levels to implement and sustain career pathway systems. The CETC offers a number of steps that could be taken to enhance development of high quality pathway systems, including:

Federal

- Require that career pathways programs demonstrate they are responsive to credible labor market demand, focusing on real job opportunities in key sectors.
- Foster improvements in the American Job Centers, engaging all partners to assure centers have the resources and capabilities to support career pathways strategies effectively.
- Expand eligibility for financial aid for industry-recognized credentials/certifications.

- Identify effective methods to evaluate progress over time along a career pathway and use this methodology to inform funding decisions (multi-year grants) and outcome measures (stackable credentials and digital badging).
- Incentivize collaboration at the state and regional level providing resources for the development of partnerships and career pathway initiatives.

State/Local

- Strengthen the state-level leadership role of the state workforce investment board to drive career pathways efforts across the myriad agencies/programs/funding streams in the statewide workforce system.
- Ensure that limited available resources are invested in programs that achieve tangible desirable results. Use high-quality performance standards to drive funding decisions and reward for exceptional performance. Collect and analyze data at the program level to determine effectiveness and impact on student outcomes.
- Build effective state-level capacity to collect, analyze and report on accurate, sector-sensitive career pathways-related data to inform planning and accountability.
- Incentivize employers to take more responsibility for the cost and provision of training. Increase direct employer investment in training and commitment to job placement and retention for trained, productive workers.
- Inventory training offerings provided by employers, to identify opportunities to leverage/braid private dollars with government funding to maximize training opportunities.
- Build early-/middle-college programs focusing on careers in key sectors on the growing foundation of theme-based career academies (high schools) across Connecticut.
- Build bridges between community college continuing education and academic programs at the institutional and curriculum levels and promote navigation through mentors and case managers.
- Adopt and fund career advising and case management as core components of all career pathway programs.
- Capitalize on Connecticut's strong technical high school system infrastructure by opening up (in off-hours) the school facilities for adult instruction and other training options.

- Investigate use of social impact bonds to support/sustain career pathways opportunities.
- Develop and maintain an accessible career pathways website that provides step-by-step guidance for potential students and their parents.
- Infuse career content into adult education services to reach lower level learners at the first stage in career pathway system.

Conclusion

Connecticut has developed considerable practical experience in building career pathways strategies. However, most of the relevant efforts have occurred at program scale and have proven difficult to sustain over time to achieve maximum impact for jobseekers, workers and employers. In addition, the progressive and volatile nature of the job market also requires a regular review of skills and training curricula to ensure that programs aligned to current demand and that students are best prepared to fill job vacancies.

The strategies recommended in this paper directed at federal, state and local government would go a long way to building a sustainable, effective career pathways system in Connecticut. CETC and its multiple stakeholders welcome the opportunity to participate in this national dialogue. We look forward to working with the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services and Labor in order to bring those efforts to scale and to sustain them over time.