

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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Strengthening Cities Through
Workforce Development



THE U.S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

February 23, 2026



Washington Update

U.S. Department of Education

On Thursday, February 19, Senators Susan Collins (ME), Jeff Merkley (OR), and Reverend Raphael Warnock (GA) led a bipartisan group of approximately 30 Senators on a letter to Secretary of Education Linda McMahon urging her agency to promptly open applications for federal TRIO grant programs that support college access for disadvantaged students. The request focuses on issuing application notices by March 1 for Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers, which provide college admissions counseling and educational guidance to middle and high school students as well as adults seeking to continue their education. In the letter, the bipartisan group raises concerns about prior delays in awarding TRIO grants and warns that late grant timelines can disrupt program operations, potentially leading to staffing reductions or scaled-back services that affect students' access to college preparation support.

The Department of Education has indicated that application notices will be released in the coming weeks. Congress allocated nearly \$1.2 billion for TRIO programs in the FY26 spending package. Lawmakers are seeking a March application release to ensure grants are awarded by June 30, allowing programs to begin on schedule in September.

[Click here](#) to read the full press release and access the letter.

GAO Report

On Friday, February 20, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released the report "Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Actions Needed to Ensure People with Disabilities

Can Access DOL Job Programs” that examined how disabled job seekers still face challenges accessing state and local workforce development programs. The report, requested by House Education and Workforce Committee Ranking Member Bobby Scott (VA) and Congresswoman Frederica Wilson (FL), found that although progress has been made to improve accessibility, barriers remain.

It highlights ongoing challenges in ensuring that third-party training providers offer appropriate accommodations, which can limit access to job training services for individuals with disabilities. While states and local workforce systems have taken steps to improve access, gaps in implementation continue to affect service delivery. The GAO report indicates that additional actions are needed to ensure consistent accessibility across the workforce system.

[Click here](#) to access the full GAO report.

Independent-Contractor Status Poll

According to a recent poll conducted by Impact Research, there is broad public support for maintaining independent-contractor status for app-based workers if companies provide access to portable benefits, such as savings plans that workers can carry between platforms. The survey found that 76 percent of respondents support this approach, including 79 percent of Democrats and 76 percent of Republicans. Support is also strong among app-based workers, with 88 percent favoring retention of independent-contractor status. The findings come as the Trump administration advances a proposed rule to rescind a Biden-era labor standard that had encouraged classifying more workers as employees. The prior rule faced multiple legal challenges, and enforcement was paused before the new proposal moved forward through the regulatory review process.

The debate over worker classification remains active at the federal and state levels. Labor advocates argue that independent-contractor status can limit access to traditional employer-provided benefits and collective bargaining rights. Supporters of the contractor model emphasize flexibility and the potential expansion of portable benefits.

Congress has considered legislation to address inconsistent worker-classification standards nationwide, though no comprehensive measure has advanced. Senate Republicans on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee previously proposed legislation to expand portable benefits frameworks and reduce litigation over worker classification. At the state level, California reached an agreement with Uber and Lyft allowing drivers to unionize under certain conditions tied to health coverage requirements.

[Click here](#) to access the poll results.



U.S. Department of Labor Announces Availability of \$65 Million in Grants to Help Community Colleges Increase Access to In-Demand, High-Quality Training

On Tuesday, February 17, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) announced the availability of \$65 million in funding to support programs that help community colleges develop high-quality, short-term training programs that meet employers' and workers' skill development needs. Administered by the department's Employment and Training Administration, this sixth round of Strengthening Community College Training Grants funding is focused on programs that seek eligibility for the newly authorized Workforce Pell Grants. It will fund projects nationwide, with individual awards up to approximately \$11 million. The department is emphasizing funding for applicants that are working toward developing an integrated, learner-centered and industry aligned state-level data system.

[Click here](#) to access the full press release and learn more about how to apply.

U.S. Department of Labor Launches Open Data Portal to Enhance Access to Labor Data

The U.S. Department of Labor has launched a modern open data portal at data.dol.gov, making it more transparent and efficient for users to access data related to the American workforce. The portal helps bring the department into alignment with the OPEN Government Data Act of 2019 and the Federal Data Strategy established during President Trump's first administration.

[Click here](#) to access the full press release.

Initial Jobless Claims

In the week ending February 14, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 206,000, a decrease of 23,000 from the previous week's revised level. The previous week's level was revised up by 2,000 from 227,000 to 229,000.

[Click here](#) to access the full report.



While Others 'Vibecode,' the Labor Department Keeps it Real on AI

The natural American reaction to something novel, especially something man-made and powerful, is for earnest (usually government) technocrats to Gerberize it into something

mortals can digest and overseers can feel they've controlled. It happened with penicillin, atomic energy, and personal computers.

[Click here](#) to read the full article.

The Quality Question: Making Sense of Nearly Two Million Credentials

With nearly 2M credentials already in the marketplace, and more attention coming as Workforce Pell launches in July 2026, the question of quality in nondegree programs has high stakes. More and more learners, and soon taxpayers, will commit resources to these programs. How can students know whether a credential is worth their time and money?

[Click here](#) to read the full article.

The Apprentice: Why Higher Ed is Leaning Into Earn-and-Learn

VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. It's a management acronym popularized by the U.S. military to describe the changing world after the Cold War. But Minah Woo, vice president of workforce innovation and strategic partnerships at Howard Community College in Maryland, said it accurately describes the current operating environment for higher education.

[Click here](#) to read the full article.



New from U.S. Department of Transportation

Trump's Maritime Age Supports Next Generation of America's Maritime Workforce through Centers of Excellence

On Tuesday, February 17, the U.S. Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration (MARAD) opened applications for its Centers of Excellence program for Domestic Maritime Workforce Training and Education (CoE). Under President Trump and Secretary Sean P. Duffy, the administration is bolstering our maritime workforce and investing in research, collaboration, promotion, and policy support.

[Click here](#) to read the full press release and learn more about how to apply.

New from Brookings

From Skills to Jobs: Building Clearer Pathways to Good Work

On Thursday, February 26, from 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. (EST) Brookings Institute will host the session "From Skills to Jobs: Building Clearer Pathways to Good Work." This session will examine how education systems and labor market institutions can evolve to better support students and workers at every stage. Panelists will explore what it would take to ensure high school is relevant, postsecondary education is affordable and accessible, work-based learning options are plentiful, and pathways to good jobs are clear.

[Click here](#) to register for the session.

New from MDRC

Bringing the Individual Placement and Support Model for Employment to New Populations

Building Evidence on Employment Strategies (BEES) is a study of innovative programs designed to boost employment and earnings among people with low incomes. BEES is evaluating the effectiveness of adapting Individual Placement and Support (IPS) to reach new groups of people. In this seven-minute video, researchers and practitioners reflect on implementing IPS to help clients facing barriers to employment.

[Click here](#) to access the full video.



Fact of the Week

More than 455,000 women exited the U.S. workforce between January and August 2025. Among those who left voluntarily (58%), 42% cited caregiving responsibilities, including childcare costs, as the primary reason. Women from marginalized racial and ethnic groups were more likely to report being laid off (53%) than White women (37%), underscoring disproportionate impacts on women of color.

[Click here](#) to read the full article.



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