Community-Based Organizations, Immigrant Low-wage Workers, and the Workforce Development System in the United States

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Executive Summary

The workforce development system in the United States has come under increased scrutiny in the wake of the Great Recession and the so-called “jobless recovery,” where 15.8 million American workers remain unemployed. It is more critical than ever that the current system provide the education, training, and career ladders that workers need. Yet there is ample evidence that certain groups—particularly low-wage and immigrant workers—are not served well by the traditional workforce development system.

Community-based “worker centers” have emerged as a critical actor to provide services and advocacy support to disadvantaged groups left out of government-provided services. Within these, one of the “best practices” has been sector-based centers that serve industries with large concentrations of low-wage workers (like restaurants and domestic care), where there are high incidents of abuse, but also the potential for policy reforms. The main lesson for governments is that in order to curb the exploitation of low-wage workers and help them advance in the workplace, there is a need to develop strategies that go beyond the reach of traditional systems. Community-based organizations can be instrumental in delivering the following types of information and services:

- **Information and Transparency Initiatives.** Many low-wage immigrant workers are beyond the reach of formal training and skills programs, and are likely to be unfamiliar with options for protecting their workplace rights. Initiatives to make information about education, skills, and workplace rights more readily available, and to tailor it to particular industry conditions and practices, are therefore imperative to achieving the overarching goals of education and skills programs—helping individuals become self-sufficient and make the most of their human capital.

- **Support to access basic services and navigate systems.** Lack of proficiency in the host-country language (all-too common for adults in low-wage occupations) is a huge barrier to economic advancement. Yet many immigrants shun formal classroom settings because of difficulty navigating bureaucracies, distance from their neighborhood, scheduling of class time during work hours, and lack of instruction materials and methods relevant to their workplace needs. As these workers feel more comfortable and at ease interacting with CBOs and worker centers, there is scope for these organizations to act as an on-ramp into other more formal systems.

- **Focus on Second-Language Learning Needs.** Facilitating language acquisition and navigation in the host-country language is essential for social or economic mobility. CBOs are closest to the target communities and need to be engaged in order for service providers to understand language needs in different occupations and how best to structure and deliver services, to create economies of scale for distribution, and to reach marginalized populations.

- **Identification and action to address gaps in labor law protections.** Many low-wage immigrant workers toil in informal sectors that are not well-protected by traditional labor laws and where enforcement of existing laws is by definition weak. CBOs and worker centers have been very successful in identifying gaps in labor law, creating innovative approaches to organizing workers and/or negotiating changes in wages and working conditions, and in some cases achieving new legal protections and policy changes. These all result in better use of the human capital and skills of immigrant workers, allowing them to get a fair return on their labor—a critical factor in their social and economic integration.
I. Introduction

In the last decade, there have been significant changes to the structure and functioning of labor markets, the demographic composition of the labor force, working conditions, and opportunities for career advancement in the United States. These ten years have been described as a period of “jobless recovery,” ending with the deepest recession since the great depression. In contrast to the period between 1993 and 2001 when close to 22.7 million jobs were added to the economy, employment growth stagnated in the period between 2001 and 2009 with the creation of only 1.1 million jobs. Since 2009, a period broadly described as “the Great Recession,” the US economy has lost a staggering 2.4 million jobs and estimates suggest there are over 15.8 million unemployed Americans.

These changes have created anxiety among broad segments of the population, reviving debates about the allocation and distribution of societal resources. This has led to increased focus on the strategies and policies developed and implemented by government, civil society, and philanthropic institutions to attempt to mitigate some of the negative impacts of an evolving labor market and changing economy. In particular, the workforce development system has become a focus of attention for its potential to provide the education, training, and access to career ladders for disadvantaged workers.

The US workforce development system is complex and multilayered. Numerous organizational actors provide services, engage in advocacy, and develop policy strategies at the local, regional, and national levels. While local autonomy has led to significant differences in the shape and operations of the workforce system across local areas and regions, over the last two decades there have been attempts to introduce standards and uniformity to the services provided, alongside stronger assessments and measurement of outcomes. Despite these changes, existing workforce organizations, training providers, and educational institutions can be slow to adapt to shifting labor markets, emerging local populations, and the changing needs of employers, job seekers, and local communities. This has created the space for a new wave of organizations that attempts to improve the scope and reach of the traditional workforce development system.¹

This paper focuses on the emergence of community-based worker centers and low-wage worker organizations that engage in organizing, social service provision, and advocacy support for immigrants and low-wage workers who are not served well by the traditional workforce development system.² The paper first provides an overview of the low-wage labor market and the workforce development system in the United States, after which it identifies gaps in the workforce system and outlines the challenges faced by low-wage and immigrant workers that created the need for worker centers. The paper then discusses the development of worker centers and worker center networks and describes their activities, concluding with an assessment of the main challenges faced by low-wage workers and the organizations that support them, and recommendations for how policymakers can improve the effectiveness of these groups.

² Fine, Janice. 2006. Workers Center: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press defines worker centers as: “community-based and community-led organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy, and organizing to provide support to low-wage workers (p.2).”
II. Background: The Low-Wage Labor Market in the United States

The US economy and labor market have been shaped by a number of trends and developments. First, the markets for capital, labor, production, and consumption have become increasingly globalized. The production and labor markets in particular are now characterized by global production chains, corporate networks, and transnational labor recruitment regimes. These new networks of local and global consumption are facilitated by advances in technology, transportation, and telecommunications.

Second, the productivity of US workers and firms has grown but compensation for workers has remained stagnant. Many sectors, but especially manufacturing and services, generate more output with lower labor inputs and fewer full-time workers. Meanwhile, there has been growth in outsourcing, subcontracting, and multiple production chains in a range of jobs and industries. This has led to increased use of flexible and temporary workers, the development of a temporary staffing industry, and increased reliance on labor market intermediaries to source and secure labor. Finally, declining union participation across regions and sectors of the US economy has reduced the power of workers to bargain and negotiate working terms, conditions, and benefits.

These economic changes have combined with demographic changes to the workforce (resulting largely from increased immigration) to produce a much more complex labor force and challenging labor market. In 2005, immigrants represented 15 percent of the US labor force, and their share in the labor force has been growing. Immigrants who had entered the United States since 2000 accounted for 67 percent of the overall growth in the civilian labor force by 2005, and in 12 states, they accounted for over 80 percent of growth. However, new immigrant workers were overrepresented in low-skill jobs, making up more than a fifth (21 percent) of low-wage workers and almost half (45 percent) of workers without a high school education.

In total, approximately 34 million workers are employed in "low-wage occupations," although exact numbers vary depending on how the various sectors are defined and the kind of data used.

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4 Osterman, Paul and Beth Shulman. 2011. Good jobs America: Making work pay better for everyone. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. An analysis of recent data suggests that the world’s largest employers are Wal-Mart (in retail) at over 1.8 million (with 1.2 million “associates” in the US) and Manpower (in the staffing industry) with 350,000 employees in the US and 4 million globally. Other large US employers are in fast food, McDonald’s (number 2 among large employers in the US and 4 in the world with 450,000 workers), and in logistics with UPS (number 3 in the US and 7 in the world with over 400,000 workers).
8 Defined as occupations with more than 500,000 employees; The most commonly used definition of low-wage workers is based on the percentage of workers not earning enough wages to lift them over the federally defined poverty line. Using the US standard poverty level as a reference gives us a measure that can be adjusted for family size and also used to make comparisons over time. Other definitions of low-wage workers include: (a) workers earning below minimum wage (approximately $7.25 per hour or $15,000 for a person working 40 hours per week for 52 weeks) but since the minimum has not changed over time this measure makes comparisons difficult; or (b) living wages (at $10.25 per hour is close to $21,320 for a person working 40 hours a week for 52 weeks) which are locally based estimates that change over time and
Table 1 breaks down the largest low-wage occupations in the United States based on the type of workforce development provider that targets them. The first section includes occupations typically served by the mainstream workforce development system and related service organizations, the second panel includes occupations typically served by both worker centers and workforce development systems, and the third panel includes occupations served predominantly by worker centers. As Table 1 shows, the largest low-wage occupations in terms of numbers of workers are in the retail, office, and security guard industries. These occupations are targeted by the existing workforce development system.

### Table 1: Low-wage Occupations and the Workforce Development System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation and Workforce Development System</th>
<th>No of workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupations Primarily Targeted by Workforce Development System</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail, Office and Security Guards</td>
<td>15,130,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupations Targeted by Workforce Development System and Worker Centers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing Aides, Home Health and Child Care</td>
<td>2,612,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Service</td>
<td>7,390,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupations Targeted by Mostly by Worker Centers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maids and Personal Care</td>
<td>1,460,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction, Warehouse and Production</td>
<td>6,737,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>33,331,560</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


9 In trying to better understand the location of low-wage work it can be useful to think about the segmentation of industries and occupations separately and then to think about how they are linked. There are industries that include high proportions of low-wage workers (low-wage industries) but there are also low-wage workers in high wage industries. In terms of occupations there are high and low-wage occupations but even within occupations there is a distribution of earnings and we can categorize occupations as high and low-wage occupations with an understanding that there are likely to be some high wage workers in low-wage occupations and some low-wage workers in high wage occupations.

10 Fine, Janice. 2006. *Workers Center: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press defines worker centers as: “community-based and community-led organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy, and organizing to provide support to low-wage workers (p.2).”

11 These include retail salespersons, cashiers, general office clerks, stock clerks, receptionists and information clerks, security guards, and tellers.

12 Including combined food preparation and serving workers (including fast food); wait staff; food preparation workers, cooks (both restaurant and fast food); and counter attendants, cafeteria, food concessions, and coffee shop workers.

13 Included are labourers and freight, stock, and material movers; janitors and cleaners, except maids and housekeeping: landscaping and groundskeepers; packers and packagers; and production workers.
Other low-wage occupations in the food industry, nursing and personal-care industry, and construction industry have some access to the workforce system, but have segments with little access and where labor and other rules and regulations are frequently violated. These segments of the labor force include large proportions of immigrants, including unauthorized workers in relatively vulnerable positions, subject to exploitation, and not connected to adult education, training, and workforce development opportunities.

III. The US Workforce Development System

The workforce development system in the United States relies on many different actors, organizations, and constituencies to deliver its services. The three most important groups are government, business, and the non-profit sector, each of which experiences its own set of challenges. Within each of these three categories is a complex ecosystem of other actors including federal, state, and local government entities and departments, community colleges, workforce development organizations and training providers, private industry councils, chambers of commerce, employers and employer groups, research groups and think tanks, educational institutions, advocacy organizations, philanthropic organizations, and other civil society organizations. Since the system evolved unevenly in different areas and parts of the country, there is a tension between needs at the local level and the need for uniformity and comparative standards at the federal level.

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A. Government Entities and Departments

Various government actors operate at the federal, state, and local levels:

- **Federal level.** The US Department of Labor provides most of the federal resources and policy guidance on the national workforce system, which is made up of a collection of state, city, and regional working areas. The federal government also supplies funding to programs run at the state or local levels.\(^{17}\)

- **State level.** States’ labor departments administer the majority of federal workforce funds, along with any additional state funds or programs. State labor departments coordinate work plans, help establish policy priorities, and have responsibilities for managing the workforce system and enforcing all labor laws and regulations at the state level.

- **Local level.** Many cities and localities also have departments tasked with administering the workforce system and monitoring workforce investments. In New York City, for example, the NYC Department of Small Business Services coordinates workforce activities in the city and manages federal, state and city funds for workforce services.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) http://www.dol.gov/


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**Box 1. Definition of Worker Centers**

Worker centers are community-based organizations designed to help low-wage immigrants navigate the world of work. They offer a variety of information and services to improve wages and working conditions for disadvantaged workers, including through:

- **Organizing**, helping workers develop a collective voice (often within a specific metropolitan area or neighborhood, rather than an individual worksite), and training workers to take action on their own behalf;

- **Direct service provision**, providing information on workers’ rights, legal aid, or English-language training; and

- **Advocacy**, exposing incidents of exploitation by specific employers or industries and calling for policy change and reforms.

It is the advocacy and organizing elements that distinguish worker centers from other community-based organizations that work with immigrants.

There is a long history of collaboration between the Federal Department of Labor and a number of philanthropic institutions. One example is the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, an initiative of national and local funders that creates workforce partnerships to support low-wage workers.\textsuperscript{19} Collaboration allows for initiatives and programs to be spread across larger geographic areas, creates a context where different tools and methodologies can be tried, incorporates the expertise of several organizations, and can be an effective way to provide services and support for more marginalized populations.

\textsuperscript{19} http://www.nfw solutions.org/
B. Community Colleges

Community colleges are central actors in the workforce system and play an important role in the design and delivery of occupation- and industry-based training programs. An increasingly large share of state and local funding for workforce services is allocated to community colleges. They use this funding to design and develop training in collaboration with community-based organizations (CBOs) and worker centers and to provide access to their training programs and educational opportunities through financial support, developing marketing and outreach strategies, and securing resources to support the expansion of services provided by CBOs to their clients and members.

While these partnerships have strengthened over the last decade, a number of challenges remain. Since community colleges are complex institutions with many of their own internal and external stakeholders and constituencies, they have historically been disconnected from other community groups and organizations. Partnerships with community groups can be complex and costly and the resources needed to manage collaborations are rarely supported with tax-levy or student tuition funds and often require other sources of financial support.

Second, while community colleges have expertise, scale, and reach in terms of their knowledge of workforce development and their potential ability to serve disadvantaged populations (such as low-wage workers, first generation college students, adult learners, people of color, immigrants and others that are marginalized from more traditional higher education opportunities), they often lack solid linkages to CBOs for service support and with employers for post-training placements. Additionally, there is little coordination between “for credit” degree programs and certificate or “non-credit” offerings, which makes it difficult for low-wage workers to transfer between the systems.

C. Employers

Employers can help identify skill needs, support the development of training programs, and leverage public and other private resources. But engaging employers can be difficult given that their main interests are the products of the system and the costs of training, rather than the design or management of the workforce development system itself.

Collaboration between employers and worker centers has focused on helping businesses understand the value of worker training and investment, particularly in low-wage industries that have regular customer contact and a service component. Other efforts include communication initiatives designed to educate businesses and employers in low-wage industries about the value and long-term benefits of increasing wages, connecting workers to career ladders, and providing other supports and benefits to their workers. Employers’ associations, including Private Industry Councils (PICs), and Chambers of Commerce (CoCs), also play an important role in bringing the experience and interests of local businesses and economic development organizations into the design and evaluation of training programs.

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20 For example see http://www.bostonpic.org/; http://www.privateindustrycouncil.com/; http://www.oaklandpic.org/
21 The US http://www.uschamber.com/ and a range of local chambers http://www.ny-chamber.com/
D. Research, Advocacy, and Related Civil Society Organizations

Community-based workforce development organizations and training providers are central to the design and delivery of training and related support services to low-wage workers. There is a considerable degree of collaboration among the following four main types of non-profit organizations on a range of programs, service and policy issues, and campaigns:22

- Foundations and related funders, which make philanthropic resources available for innovation, research and advocacy, and to a lesser extent direct program services.
- Research and policy groups, which identify needs and service gaps, analyze labor market trends, and examine the effectiveness of programs and initiatives.
- Advocacy groups, which work on specific campaigns designed to increase the visibility of a particular issue or challenge that impacts low-wage workers.
- Social service providers and labor market intermediaries, which design, develop, and implement service strategies and programs directly with workers and other program participants.

IV. Gaps in the Mainstream Workforce Development System

Discussions with actors in the field suggest that workforce development has encountered a number of challenges,23 which can be divided into individual-level barriers and institutional-level challenges:

Individual-level barriers and challenges: Underserved populations face several challenges accessing workforce development services. These groups may lack of information about training opportunities because of difficulties presented by the location of information providers or the manner or language in which the information is supplied. In addition, they may fear accessing public programs, services, and systems due to intimidating bureaucracies or lack of proper documentation. For immigrants from places where workforce development does not exist or operates very differently, a lack of familiarity with workforce training and career-related information may also be a problem. Immigrants may also have difficulty accessing system entry points, as offices are often in government buildings that do not make immigrants feel welcomed or give them a sense that the services being offered are designed for them. Additional challenges include barriers related to eligibility requirements for particular workforce programs and services; scheduling, time availability, child care, and transportation-related challenges that make it hard for people, from a logistic and cost perspective, to regularly access needed services and programs; and challenges related to working with populations with multiple obstacles, needs, and barriers to employment.

Institutional- or system-level challenges: Organizations providing workforce development services also face obstacles in delivering these services to needy populations, including immigrants. These obstacles may include unclear program guidelines and complex operating rules and requirements; inadequate provision of information about specific policy and funding

initiatives and opportunities so that groups often are not aware of funding opportunities for particular services; multiple funding streams and complicated reporting requirements, which place onerous record-keeping and reporting requirement on grassroots organizations working with small staffs and serving marginalized populations; a lack of coverage for certain client needs in reimbursed services leading to incomplete and more difficult service provision strategies (clients often need access to several different types or categories of services but workforce programs are mostly funded to provide a limited set of training services and supports); limited staff training within non-profit service providers on the many facets and functions of social service and program work with vulnerable populations; discontinuities in service provision due to termination of program and funding streams; and challenges of developing and sustaining employer engagement.

While the government is the main enabler and funder of the workforce system, it is not always in the best position to address these challenges. The multiplicity of interests, dependencies, departments, stakeholders, and components creates difficulties in managing and reforming the workforce development system because it is hard to develop consensus. Businesses are interested in the operations, products, and costs of the workforce system, but lack the resources and incentives to manage the system or systematically advocate for policy reforms that further the interests of all workers.

This leaves the complex and diverse non-profit sector as the main agent for systemic change. Foundations, social and employment service providers, and advocacy groups in particular are in a unique position to propose reforms and steer workforce development policies and programs in the right direction, as well as to help manage the workforce system. Over the last decade a number of organizations and networks have collaborated to develop policies that support low-wage workers and have continued to move the field forward. These emerging networks include national research and policy organizations, national human and social services groups, constituency based organizations and networks; and local/regional organizations with national reach.

V. Community-Based Organizations and Workforce Development Strategies

E. The Emergence of Immigrant Worker Centers

The last ten years have seen the emergence of a set of organizations known as worker centers (see Box 1), which are community-based and community-led organizations that engage in

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25 These include the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), The National Employment Law Project (NELP), Public and Private Ventures (PPV), Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP);

26 These include SEEDCO, and Jobs for the Future (JFF);

27 Like the National Skills Coalition (NSC), EARN Network, National Network of Sector Partners (NNSP), Partnership for Working Families, Working America, the Urban League, the National Council for La Raza (NCLR)

28 Such as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), Make the Road New York, Casa Maryland, Casa Latina in Seattle, Workers Defense Project in Texas; Hispanic Resource Center (NY); The Hispanic Federation (NY).
organizing, advocacy, and labor market intermediation, and provide a range of services to low-wage workers in the most marginalized sectors of the labor market.\textsuperscript{29} These networks and organizations connect low-wage workers to needed social services and programs, and work to improve the quality of jobs in low-income communities, which has been essential to securing better individual outcomes for workers.\textsuperscript{30} Most worker centers feature collaborations between workers and social service professionals to identify programs and approaches that improve working conditions or job quality, and secure access to training opportunities for workers.\textsuperscript{31} They are also involved in advocacy, research, and policy development.\textsuperscript{32} Worker centers are unique in that they focus on immigrant and low-wage workers; they combine services, research, advocacy and organizing; and are involved in some direct labor market functions related to employment, training, or worker education.

Over 150 organizations around the country now provide a range of direct services and advocacy for low-wage workers, immigrant workers, and other marginalized segments of the labor force.\textsuperscript{33} Various types of worker centers exist, including centers organized around a particular area or community;\textsuperscript{34} centers based on managing and supporting workers in particular day-labor corners;\textsuperscript{35} centers that are part of multi-service organizations focused on labor and low-wage workers;\textsuperscript{36} centers that are part of multiservice social services organizations;\textsuperscript{37} centers that are union related;\textsuperscript{38} centers that are part of interfaith groups;\textsuperscript{39} centers that are started by coalitions of organizations;\textsuperscript{40} centers that are publicly supported and organized by municipalities;\textsuperscript{41} industry/occupation-based centers;\textsuperscript{42} and centers based on ethnic or national origin affiliations.\textsuperscript{43}

These organizations are especially effective at addressing the needs of low-wage workers and developing strategies that improve the quality of low-wage jobs by focusing on sectors with high proportions of low-wage workers (see Table 1), and where they see potential for making jobs better through a combination of worker training, industry- and employer-based strategies, research, and public policy development. They focus on sectors where there are allegations of significant numbers of health, wage, and hour violations; that have significant proportions of people of color and new entrants in the workforce; and that are relatively ubiquitous but the work is often unseen or happens “behind the scenes” (the visible but invisible maid, or nanny, or the busboy at the restaurant). However, they also look for sectors where there is the potential for policy advancement and network building, and some organizing capacity and experience.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} For example Albany Park Workers Center in Chicago; Casa Latina in Seattle; Workers Defense Project in Austin; New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice; El Centro del Inmigrante in Staten Island.
\textsuperscript{35} Jornaleros Unidos de Freehold in NJ; Workers Justice Project in NY.
\textsuperscript{36} Tenants and Workers United in Virginia; the Hispanic Resource Center of Larchmont and Mamaroneck.
\textsuperscript{37} Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of LA [CHIRLA], Casa de Maryland.
\textsuperscript{38} Harris County AFL-CIO, Justice & Equality in the Workplace Program.
\textsuperscript{39} Eastern North Carolina Interfaith Workers Rights Center.
\textsuperscript{40} Coalición Hispana de Ossining, Hispanic Westchester Coalition.
\textsuperscript{41} Pomona Day Laborer Center.
\textsuperscript{42} Domestic Workers United, Garment Workers Center, Restaurant Opportunities Center, Direct Care Alliance.
\textsuperscript{43} Filipinos Workers’ Center, Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates [KIWA].
F. The Evolution of Sectoral Worker Center Networks

Over the last two decades, the sectoral approach to training and workforce development has come to be considered best practice in terms of how to structure and deliver training, connect workers to jobs, improve job quality, and work with employers and firms in key occupations and industries. Sector initiatives focus intensively on a specific industry over a sustained time period, customizing solutions for multiple employers within a regional labor market, and harnessing the expertise of organizations that have a deep understanding of worker and employer needs and challenges in an industry (and within a regional labor market) to develop industry-based workforce solutions. The rationale behind this approach is that it strengthens economic growth and industry competitiveness by creating effective workforce pathways for trained workers to enter targeted industries, and it benefits low-income individuals by creating routes into middle-class jobs and careers.44

As the sectoral approach to workforce development has developed, a number of sectoral training initiatives have formed in various segments of the labor market including healthcare, retail, transportation, warehouse and logistics, hospitality, manufacturing, and the emerging green jobs sector. These have been augmented by a set of emerging initiatives in more marginalized segments of the labor market and in sectors where the immigrant workforce has become a significant proportion of the labor force including the construction, laborer, landscaping, and demolition sectors; the restaurant industry; home care; domestic work; and in emerging areas such as the car wash industry, green gardening, food vending, and related low-wage sectors.

Over the last six years, as worker centers have continued to develop their work, programs, strategies, and policies, many have come together to join existing worker center networks. In 2007, national worker center networks were few and far between. They included Enlace,45 a campaign-based network with members throughout the United States and Mexico focused on campaigns in specific sectors such as garment work, food manufacturing, and farming/fishing; and Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ),46 which included a range of faith-based worker centers that focused on low-wage industries and engaged in worker rights education and campaigns against workplace abuses and wage theft.

Worker center networks have now evolved to serve several industries with large concentrations of low-wage and immigrant workers (see Table 1). These networks provide substantial support including assistance in organizing workers, developing a set of training protocols and programs, working to help establish guidelines on the various jobs and positions in the industry, and developing a sophisticated analysis of employers in the industry and the perspective for job growth in the key sectors at the local and national level. Worker center networks have been formed to serve workers in the construction, landscaping, demolition and laborer sectors; the restaurant industry; domestic workers; and the home health care sector (see Box 3).

44 See National Network of Sector Partners (NNSP)
45 ENLACE was founded in 1998 as a strategic alliance by a group of organizations working to promote and protect human and labor rights and provide better employment opportunities for low-income residents and immigrants in both the U.S. and Mexico.
46 Interfaith Workers Justice was founded in 1998. Its mission is “to engage the religious community in issues and campaigns to improve wage, benefits and working conditions for workers, especially low-wage workers.”
As these networks are made up of organizations that are quite different, they have different histories, staff, and resources. While all organizations that are members of the key networks share the main goals and strategies of each network, and a similar set of challenges and needs, they are often at different stages of development. The networks share information about programs, practices, policy campaigns and challenges; provide opportunities for collaboration and sharing of experiences; aggregate the voice of individual organizations; engage in public education and develop communication strategies; collaborate on research; and help acquire, pool and manage resources to individual organizations.

**Box 3. Worker Center Networks in Four Key Sectors**

The Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) was originally founded after September 11, 2001 to support and organize restaurant workers displaced from the World Trade Center’s “Windows of the World” restaurant. It organizes workers in several key cities in one of the country’s fastest-growing sectors. Through training and workforce development, strategic research and policy analysis, workplace organizing and justice campaigns against 'low-road' restaurant companies, and the promotion of 'high-road' restaurants and business practices, ROC has attempted to effect improvements in working conditions and influence the broader restaurant industry to treat its largely immigrant workforce with dignity and respect.

The National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON) was launched in 2001 and now includes over 50 organizations. The network aims to strengthen, connect, and expand the work of member organizations to become effective and strategic in building leadership, advancing low-wage worker and immigrant rights, and developing successful models for organizing immigrant contingent/temporary workers. The construction, landscaping, demolition, and home repair industries are quite large and there is great variation and diversity in the types of employers, workplaces, and working conditions. NDLON has played a key role in segmenting and regularizing the bottom of the labor market and connecting it to apprenticeship opportunities and career ladders, often in collaboration with organized labor. NDLON has also been central to the development of adult education and training for workers, increased training in occupational safety and health, and the development of worker-led campaigns to improve access to jobs, improve working conditions, and increase job quality.

Direct Care Alliance (DCA) was founded in 1998 is a national non-profit dedicated to improving working conditions for direct care workers, professionalizing the industry, developing training standards, and providing other support for workers. Direct care work, the fastest-growing occupation in health care, is primarily staffed women of color including a large immigrant population who see it as a pathway out of welfare and poverty. DCA tackles the growing gap between the supply and demand for direct-care workers; the training needs of workers, employers, and consumers; the working conditions of direct care workers; and the policy and social barriers that impact this workforce.

The Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) consists of more than 17 grassroots organizations across the United States that have come together to organize domestic workers, end the exclusion of domestic workers from recognition and labor protection, and support the development of training models and the professionalization of the domestic work industry.

**VI. CBOs and the Workforce Development System**
The types of main activities of worker centers and worker center networks can be divided into worker-based activities (or those that focus on providing direct services to workers) and employer-based activities and approaches to improve job quality (focusing more directly on the jobs themselves and working with employers to improve working conditions, pay, and benefits).

G. Worker-Based Activities

The worker dimension is essential in the way it connects organizations to their members, constituencies, and communities. Some worker-centered activities that have been developed include:

- Strategies to enhance and increase member recruitment.
- Support for identifying specific training needs of workers and best approaches and ways to deliver those training service to marginalized workers.
- Development of strategies and programs to provide adult education, human capital building, and training services and programs for workers including the use of popular education, contextual language learning, literacy, and related pedagogical tools and materials.
- Training in occupational health and safety including support for training seminars at the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) on proper use of work equipment, safety procedures, how to identify potential safety hazards, and workplace health issues.
- Building opportunities for worker centers to acquire federal government resources for training.
- Developing training programs and opportunities for workers to connect to career ladders in a range of sectors.
- Labor market intermediation and support in job placement.
- Support for research and other activities that have investigated the challenges faced marginalizing workers in accessing existing career ladders and have included reports with path breaking research on day laborers, restaurant workers, domestic workers, and other low wage sectors.
- Strategies to improve wage enforcement and worker rights including the development of relations with state departments of labor investigative and enforcement teams.
- Leader identification and training, leadership development, and organizational change management to support the development of the next generation of organization leaders, organizers, advocates and service providers.
- Strategies to understand the key industries where workers concentrate and activities to engage and better understand the needs of employers in these sectors.
- Connections to organized labor, specialized training providers and community colleges to develop connections and opportunities for workers associated with worker centers to participate in training and the education opportunities offered by these institutions.

H. Employer-Based Activities and Work on Job Quality

In order to increase access to training, improve job quality, and improve the livelihoods of low-wage workers, many worker centers and worker center networks have developed a range of strategies designed to work more closely with employers. Many of the worker center networks
have been developing “high-road” policies for their industries. The development of these strategies is complex and varies between the construction sector, restaurant industry, home care, and other industries. There is a need not only to know more about what the high road is, but also to help workers and employers distinguish between high-road, medium-road, and low-road firms. To do this, workers, employers, and customers must be educated about the criteria and data that are used to determine, and potentially certify, the employers and establishments that maintain high-road practices and identify those that do not. There is also a need to know more about the internal (or worker-driven) motivations, such as higher worker productivity or better customer service, versus external (or customer/market) driven motivations for adopting and operating in the high road.

Some of the strategies worker centers have developed to focus on employers and improve working conditions and job quality include:

- Understanding and articulating the needs of employers particularly around labor needs and management of workers.
- Developing training protocols and curriculum in particular industries and workplaces.
- Supporting the identification and development of career ladders within and across firms.
- Support for training and education in occupational safety and health.
- Support for the identification of best employer practices with workers and work promoting high road employers.
- Human resource management, labor procurement, and the establishment of promotion regimes in firms.

The Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) has been one of the most innovative in terms of the complexity and sophistication of their employer-based strategies. Their high-road strategy with employers includes a number of elements that other groups, organizations and sectors have been examining to see if they can be replicated in other industries. The first element of the strategy includes the identification of the best workplace practices from the perspective of workers. The second element is exploring the conditions under which those practices can be put in place in other workplaces. The third element involves improving worker voice and input in the workplace by distributing the Restaurant Owners’ Guide to every restaurant that gets a license to operate. The guide includes information on all relevant laws, worker rights, and best practices in the industry from a health and safety perspective.

ROC’s strategy has been to collaborate with workers and high-road employers to educate other workers, employers and consumers on best practices. ROC also advocates directing traffic and support to places that treat their workers properly and increasing the penalties that can be levied against low-road and other employers that routinely violate health, safety, wage/hour and worker rights and laws. They enlist high-road employers as advocates to encourage the development of the high road in the industry and to increase education on high road practices. The use of collaborative approaches has charted a new model of immigrant worker organizing with implications for other low wage sectors and industries and has raised questions about the

47 “High-road” employers are considered those that pay living wages, provide benefits (such as health insurance, paid sick days, family leave and others) and provide training and upward mobility opportunities for their workers. Bernhardt, Annette, Heather Boushey, Laura Dresser, and Chris Tilly. 2008. The gloves-off economy: Workplace standards at the bottom of America’s labor market. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press
balance that is needed between incentives and penalties in order to improve working conditions and reduce the extent and rate of labor violations that is endemic in many in low wage sectors.\textsuperscript{49}

VII. Conclusions

The main lesson for governments about the evolving activities of worker centers and worker center networks is that in order for low-wage workers not to be exploited, fall further into poverty, and not advance in their workplace, there is a need to develop strategies that go beyond the reach of traditional systems. Since it is unlikely that existing systems can grow sufficiently to encompass the needs of these workers, solutions such as those implemented by community-based organizations and worker centers should be more closely scrutinized. There might be an opportunity to develop key, strategic elements, depending on the needs of stakeholders.

In particular, aspects of the work of these types of institutions that would likely be worth exploring further and/or the supporting expansion of include:

- **Information and Transparency Function/Initiatives.** Many low-wage immigrant workers are beyond the reach of formal training and skills programs, and are likely to be unfamiliar with options for protecting their workplace rights. Initiatives to make information about education, skills, and workplace rights more readily available, and to tailor it to particular industry conditions and practices, are therefore imperative to achieving the overarching goals of education and skills programs – helping individuals become self-sufficient and make the most of their human capital.

- **Support for easy to access basic services, goal-setting, and systems navigation.** Lack of proficiency in the host-country language (all-too common for adults in low-wage occupations) is a barrier to economic advancement and prevents integration. Yet many immigrants shun formal classroom settings because of difficulty navigating bureaucracies, distance from their neighborhood, scheduling of class time during work hours, and lack of relevance of instruction materials and methods provided to their workplace needs. As these workers feel more comfortable and at ease interacting with CBOs and worker centers, there is scope for these to act as an on-ramp into other more formal systems. For example, they might provide assessment of underlying education and language skills, orient workers to industry pathways/assist in goal-setting, and provide vocational language or other basic instruction. A particular focus should be on closing the “digital divide,” since many immigrants could benefit from online learning resources.

- **Focus on Second-Language Learning Needs.** Few if any countries are satisfied with their approach to the needs of second-language learners. Scale and effectiveness are generally very limited, so technological innovations that support “anytime-anywhere” learning, along with research to guide best practice, are badly needed. From an anti-poverty perspective, in many industries and geographic locations, facilitating language acquisition and navigation in the host-country language is essential for social or economic mobility. CBOs are closest to the community and need to be engaged in order for service providers to understand language needs in different occupations and how best to structure and deliver services, to create economies of scale for distribution, and for reaching marginalized population with service and program innovations.

- **Identification and action to address gaps in labor law protections.** Many low-wage immigrant workers toil in informal sectors that are not well-protected by traditional labor laws and where enforcement of existing laws is by definition weak. CBOs and worker centers have been very successful in identifying gaps in labor law protections (e.g. abuse of contingent worker classification in the United States), creating innovative approaches to organizing workers and/or negotiating changes in wages and working conditions (various
campaigns against low-road employers/industries), and in some cases achieving new legal protections and policy changes (unpaid wage laws, NYC domestic worker law). These all result in better use of the human capital and skills of immigrant workers and allow them to get a fair return on their labor—which is critical to their social and economic integration.

Community-based groups, organizations, and training providers have accumulated significant experience and expertise working with immigrant populations and should play a central role in supporting policymakers to manage labor market changes, economic needs, and demographic realities and in aligning immigration policy to the realities of immigration and the experiences of immigrants.
Works Cited


