NGA Workforce Innovation Fund & Workforce Innovation Network: Request for State Proposals

Summary

**Purpose:** In March 2021, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center), in partnership with the Cognizant Foundation, launched the Workforce Innovation Fund and Workforce Innovation Network (NGA WIN). The Network is dedicated to helping states respond to the impacts of COVID-19 on the labor market and improve employment and workforce outcomes. With additional support from Intel, Microsoft, and Western Governors University, the NGA Center is announcing a second round of grants from the Workforce Innovation Fund.

States are invited to submit a proposal to receive grant funding and technical assistance to advance digital skill development for equitable economic participation, in alignment with state workforce and economic development goals. The NGA Center will engage staff and subject matter experts to provide targeted technical assistance to Workforce Innovation Fund grantees over an eight-month period beginning in November 2021. All states that apply, as well as those not interested in applying for a grant but interested in digital skills, will be eligible to participate in select peer-learning opportunities throughout the grant period.

**Grant period:** November 2021 – June 2022

**Eligibility:** This opportunity is open to all U.S. states, commonwealths, and territories in good standing with NGA.

**Staff Contact:** Rachael Stephens, Program Director, Workforce Development & Economic Policy – rstephens@nga.org; 202.624.3545

**Interested Parties’ Webinar & Information Session:** September 20 at 2:00 PM ET
Registration link: https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_IaKwiN_1Rn2XV9kRnzZvoA

**Proposals due:** Tuesday, October 12, 2021 at 5:00 PM Eastern time. Only one proposal per state will be considered and must be received from, or with the full support of, the Governor’s office. Please see below for further submission requirements.

**Assistance Available to State Awardees:** Workforce Innovation Fund grantees will be awarded Network membership and receive:

- Up to $100,000 in direct funding to support personnel and project coordination;
- Support from NGA Center staff and other subject matter experts in carrying out the following activities as a state team:
  - Collect new or review existing data on digital skill development of learners and workers and digital skills needed by employers using tools such as the Digital Equity Scorecard;
Create or adopt a standardized definition of digital skills and digital literacy;

Map assets including existing resources, initiatives, institutions, individuals, and associations dedicated to addressing digital skill gaps by using tools including, but not limited to, the Digital Equity Scorecard;

Establish long-term SMARTIE (Strategic, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable) goals to close digital skills gaps;

Develop a comprehensive state action plan with specific policy strategies to address digital skill gaps tied to actionable goals that advance economic mobility, financial stability and job placement for workers;

Build a coalition of partners to carry out the action plan; and

Create a set of policy recommendations for the Governor to close digital skill gaps, including recommendations for immediate action and investments.

- Virtual and/or in-person site visits and regular coaching calls from NGA Center staff and NGA WIN advisory group members to meet individual state needs and priorities;
- Access to and engagement with other NGA WIN states to identify best practices and share lessons learned on innovations;
- Ongoing engagement and participation in NGA WIN activities throughout the life of the Network, including the receipt of resources and invitations to participate in milestone convenings; and
- A final letter to the state's Governor highlighting the state team's successes through this initiative.

States not selected to receive grants from the Workforce Innovation Fund, or those not seeking a grant but interested in connecting with other states, will be invited to participate in select peer-learning opportunities.

**Expected Outcomes for Workforce Innovation Fund Grantees:**

- Increased access to and awareness of available data on state digital skill gaps and digital skill needs across the state, including their intersection with racial, gender, geographic, ability and other inequities;
- A shared vision for closing digital equity and workforce achievement gaps and shared commitment by stakeholders to goals and strategies (through and beyond the end of the grant period) to serve workers and jobseekers with digital skill needs;
- Documentation of the state’s existing resources dedicated to digital skill development and equity that will inform strategic investments and opportunities for collaboration;
- Identification of potential strategies and examples for using federal funds (as well as other resources) to support digital skill development, particularly among populations with the greatest identified gaps; and
- The development of a comprehensive state action plan with policy strategies to address digital skill gaps, including digital skills training, incumbent worker training funds, and technology-focused apprenticeships. This plan will be tied to actionable goals that advance economic mobility, financial stability, and job placement for workers.
NGA Workforce Innovation Fund & Workforce Innovation Network

Founded in 1908, the National Governors Association (NGA) is the nonpartisan organization of the nation’s 55 Governors. Through NGA, Governors share best practices, address issues of national and state interest and share innovative solutions to improve state government and support the principles of federalism. The Center for Best Practices (NGA Center), the research and development arm of NGA, provides opportunities for Governors’ staff to learn about promising practices and develop innovative solutions in various areas of public policy. The NGA Center Workforce Development & Economic Policy Program, which will be leading this project, provides technical assistance across a range of issues including reducing barriers to economic participation, fostering economic dynamism and job growth, and providing training and employment opportunities that support employers’ talent needs and lead to family-sustaining careers.

Background and Overview

Digital transformation has long been changing the types of skills demanded in the labor market, as both entry-level and high-skilled jobs require an increasingly technical skillset. COVID-19 has exacerbated these changes by causing dramatic shifts in labor demand in high-tech industry sectors as well as expediting the adoption of technology across all sectors. According to research by the National Skills Coalition, nearly one in three U.S. workers ages 16-64 have few or no digital skills, and at least 38 percent of those workers are employed in jobs that require moderate or advanced computer usage.

Today’s changing labor market indicates that there is a critical need for action to ensure all workers gain the skills needed to meaningfully participate in work. In response to this need, Governors and states are already leading efforts to promote foundational and occupational digital literacy, as well as digital equity, for example. “Foundational digital literacy refers to a baseline skillset that workers need to have regardless of industry.” Meanwhile, “occupational digital literacy entails developing specific technology-related skills needed for a particular occupation or industry.”

Digital equity suggests that all workers, learners, and communities have access to training they need to gain relevant skills and the technology necessary to participate in our society and economy. Advancing digital access and skill development ensures all residents have access to reliable, affordable, and secure technological infrastructure as well as training to gain foundational digital skills and those required for specific in-demand occupations if desired.

States have a unique role to play in advancing such policies and overall digital inclusion for residents and businesses. If designed and implemented appropriately, state policies offer an accurate data portrait of current digital skill levels and gaps; establish standards and set goals for closing digital gaps, including racial equity gaps; improve workers' access to digital skill-building opportunities; and respond to newly emerging business demands for digitally skilled

employees. Participation in the NGA WIN will provide state grantees with expert technical assistance to inform their digital skill development and digital inclusion policy agendas and peer-learning from others engaged in similar policy efforts.

**NGA WIN State Activities and Commitments**

Success of grantees requires sustained commitment and active participation from grantees. State teams will collaborate across workforce development systems, economic development systems, and industry partners to advance digital skill development for equitable economic participation in alignment with the state’s economic and workforce development goals. Each grantee must commit to the following activities during the grant period to achieve project objectives:

- Participate in convenings with NGA Center staff and relevant Network Advisors, including at least two virtual or in-person team site visits, two cross-state Network meetings, and monthly one-on-one calls with NGA Center staff.
- Work collaboratively as a state team with the support of NGA staff and the WIN Advisory Network to complete an action plan containing the following activities during the grant period:
  - Review existing data on digital skill development of learners and workers and digital skills needed by employers and identify data gaps that should be addressed;
  - Create or adopt a standardized definition of digital skills and digital literacy;
  - Map assets that are or may be dedicated to addressing digital skill development and;
  - Establish long-term SMART(IE) goals to close digital skills gaps and collect relevant data.
- Work collaboratively as a state team with the support of NGA staff and the WIN Advisory Network to develop a multi-year action plan including steps toward:
  - Closing digital skills gaps based on state specific SMART(IE) goals;
  - Building a coalition of partners to carry out the action plan beyond the end of the grant period and;
  - Creating a set of policy recommendations for the Governor to advance digital skills and close digital skill gaps, including recommendations for immediate action and investments.
- Share learnings, findings and activities underway in external communications activities (e.g., press releases, op-eds, NGA blog, etc.).
- Submit a brief final report within one month of the close of the grant period summarizing the work performed, the extent to which the work met desired outcomes, lessons learned, and next steps the state will take to continue the work beyond the grant period. This final report must also include information on funds obligated or spent from the grant, with the expectation that all funds will either be expended or obligated by the end of the grant period. More details and a report template will be provided to grantees at least one month prior to the close of the grant period.

The NGA Center for Best Practices will provide virtual cohort technical assistance, mentorship, and networking. Technical assistance will consist of monthly cohort meetings, webinars, and peer learning calls. State teams will also be offered optional, direct support to states such as:
• Connecting teams to subject-matter experts;
• Facilitating connections and conversations across cohort and/or mentor states and;
• Conducting virtual site visits.

Proposal Process
Eligibility: This opportunity is open to all U.S. states, commonwealths, and territories in good standing with NGA.

Interested Parties’ Webinar and Information Session: September 20 at 2:00 PM ET
Registration link: https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_IaKwiN_1Rn2XV9kRnzZvoA

Submission Information: All proposals must be received by October 12, 2021 at 5:00 PM Eastern time. Only one proposal per state will be considered. The proposal must be received from the Governor’s office or must contain evidence of the full support of the Governor’s office. Please assemble all proposal materials (described in detail below) into one PDF document and email it to Katie Nichols, Policy Coordinator at the NGA Center.

Selection of States: The NGA Center will review state applications and select states to receive grants and participate in the targeted activities described above. Selections will be announced by October 30. For more information about selection criteria, please see below.

Timeline: The following is a tentative schedule for NGA WIN through June 2022:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 13, 2021</td>
<td>Request for proposals released</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 20, 2021 2:00 PM ET</td>
<td>Interested parties’ webinar (this event will be recorded)</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 12, 2021</td>
<td>State applications due</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 30, 2021</td>
<td>State grantees notified on or before this date</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 4</td>
<td>Grantee cohort kickoff convening; this event is mandatory for all state grantee team members</td>
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<td>November – December 2021</td>
<td>State virtual or in-person site visits</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2021 – June 2022</td>
<td>Grantees receive customized technical assistance and participate in core state team calls, Network webinars and grantee peer learning calls</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2022</td>
<td>Network convening and closeout</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 31, 2022</td>
<td>State grantee reports due to NGA Center</td>
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Proposal Content and Selection Criteria
The following summarizes the required proposal content and scoring values assigned to each section for the selection process. Each proposal can receive up to 100 points. The proposal
narrative should not exceed eight pages (excluding the cover sheet and letter of support from the Governor).

Cover Sheet
The cover sheet should identify the state team leader’s contact information, including their title, email address, telephone number and mailing address, as well as the state’s fiscal agent. The cover sheet does not count toward the eight-page limit.

Budget and W-9 – 10 Points
Please include a W-9 for the fiscal agency, as well as a budget outlining the proposed use of funds for the categories below. The budget should also be accompanied by a brief narrative highlighting the proposed use of funds. If the state plans to enter a subcontract with grant funds, please include information about your state’s procurement process documenting procurement policies and timeline. Please note that this documentation and W-9 do not count toward the eight-page limit.

- Personnel
- Indirect
- Travel and Transportation
- Communications
- Sub-contracted Services
- Other

Letter of Support from Governor – 10 Points
A letter of support from the Governor is required. The letter should state the Governor’s interest in and desired outcomes for participation in NGA WIN and how those outcomes fit within the Governor’s workforce and economic recovery agenda. The letter should identify who will be part of the state team (at least four, but no more than six members) and who will lead the team’s efforts with the NGA Center. The team should include at least one representative from the Governor’s office and state officials from relevant state agencies and community partners. (See more about recommended team composition under State Team Membership, below.) The letter of support from the Governor does not count toward the eight-page limit.

Context and Vision for Policy Change – 30 Points
Describe the state context and the Governor’s vision for advancing digital skill development for equitable economic recovery. This description should include:

- An overview of the role of digital skill development in Governor’s vision for economic recovery and growth, including which populations and industries are being targeted; and
- A description of existing statewide digital skills objectives, policies or investments, and which entities lead and fund those initiatives, as well as how such initiatives may connect with any existing statewide initiatives around digital access, including but not limited to broadband expansion programs.
Goals and Strategies – 30 Points
Describe how your state will use the technical assistance (TA) provided by NGA WIN to develop and implement the Governor’s priorities for advancing digital skill development for equitable economic participation, including:

- An overview of the state’s goal(s) for this project;
- A brief description of the proposed strategies and activities the state team will undertake to reach these goals, and TA support needed to carry out these activities;
- A description of proposed indicators of progress toward the state’s goals;
- A description of how the proposed use of funds will accomplish these goals; and
- If the state is a previous grantee of the NGA Workforce Innovation Fund, a description of how new grant funding and technical assistance will complement or otherwise carry forward objectives and early outcomes of the previous grant award.

State Team Leadership and Membership – 20 Points
Applicants must include the names and positions of their state team members, which may include at least four, but no more than six, representatives that will develop and carry out the state's activities. Teams will be evaluated on the comprehensiveness of the entities represented by their proposed team members and each team members' ability to influence state policy and practice.

Briefly discuss the composition of the team, experience of its members, how they were chosen and how they will contribute to the state's work. Please identify the intended team lead/point of contact. Please note states will have an opportunity to revise team membership if needed when they receive an award.

Required team members include:

- A representative from the Governor’s office
- A representative of the state’s workforce system responsible for overseeing relevant programs and services

Representatives from the following agencies or partners are also highly encouraged for consideration as states build their teams:

- Economic development agency
- State workforce board
- State broadband office
- State public library system
- Adult education coordinator or local provider in a key region within the state
- State human services agency
- Community and technical colleges
- State chamber of commerce or employer association(s)
- Community-based nonprofits