Obtaining a job with a good wage and benefits is the best path out of poverty, but this goal is not easy to achieve. The nation has experienced severe job loss during the Great Recession, and re-hiring has progressed slowly. While too many people are without jobs, the Working Poor Families Project’s (WPFP) most recent data analysis shows that almost one out of three working families in the U.S. are low-income. More than 10 million working families with 23 million children earn wages too low to meet basic family needs. For these families, the promise of work does not pay.

The challenges facing these families are multiple: First, too many jobs pay low wages. Nationally, more than one in four workers are in a low-wage job. Second, most jobs with good wages and benefits require some level of postsecondary education—usually a degree, credential or certificate. Thirdly, working and seeking additional education is extremely challenging; work supports and other family benefits are important in furthering these low-income working families’ success.

The WPFP supports state nonprofit organizations in strengthening state policies on behalf of low-income working families. In recent years, including this year, state policy and budget circumstances have challenged these efforts. Nonetheless, WPFP state partners have persisted in their work and, as illustrated in the state profiles that follow, continue to successfully advance state policies that can benefit low-income working families as well as protect existing effective state policies.

This report highlights key state policy actions of WPFP state partners in 2012. These efforts are often in partnership with other state groups. The report is divided into two sections with the first focusing on education and skills training policies and the second section addressing work and family support policies.

How WPFP Assists State Partners:

Since its inception, the WPFP has brought together nonprofit organizations concerned about state policies affecting low-income working families. Currently, organizations in 22 states and the District of Columbia are WPFP partners.

WPFP supports state partners to develop policy expertise in specific areas that can increase the economic opportunities for low-income adults.

We do this by:

• Designing and sponsoring state policy academies led by national experts;
• Researching and developing issue-specific policy briefs with specific recommendations for action;
• Hosting annual learning exchanges with workshops and networking opportunities;
• Convening periodic conference calls on emerging and timely issues;
• Providing annually-updated data, policy and program information that helps shed light on the size and characteristics of low-income working families in each state.
ENHANCING ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION AND SKILLS TRAINING

According to national research, by 2018, more than 60 percent of all jobs will require some postsecondary education. Yet over 25 million American’s between 18 and 64 lack a high school diploma or equivalent; another 53 million adults have only a high school diploma. In 2010, three in 10 low-income working families had at least one parent without a high-school diploma. In more than half of America’s low-income working families, no parent had any education beyond high school, putting them at a severe disadvantage in terms of job security, earnings and potential economic mobility.

For these adults, access to and completion of a postsecondary degree or credential is a key ingredient to economic mobility. Yet many obstacles block the path of low-skill adults in their efforts to obtain a postsecondary credential. WPFP state partners advocate for state policies and program practices that promote educational advancement to postsecondary credentials, effective developmental education outcomes and college affordability. Our partners promote bridges to postsecondary education for low-skill adults, support systems that increase student completion, targeted need-based scholarship programs, and improved outcomes of education and skills training institutions.

ARKANSAS: The Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges (AATYC) successfully advocated to keep $12 million in lottery scholarship funding directed toward non-traditional students. State law stipulates that as much as $12 million “can be” allocated for non-traditional students but there is no requirement that any funding be used for such students in any given year.

In addition, AATYC successfully advocated for a new state policy requiring colleges to establish a “student success plan” for all students with relatively significant developmental education needs. The plan must include activities such as student orientation, a student success course and mandatory advising.

Working to increase student outcomes, AATYC successfully recommended that institutional performance funding measures include: student success in developmental education courses, adult student graduation, minority student graduation and student employment upon graduation. Up to 25 percent of an institution’s base funding will be determined by performance on these and other measures.

During the rulemaking process, AATYC successfully recommended that mandatory exit testing for developmental education students be optional rather than mandatory. The exit testing, which often relied on national standardized tests such as the COMPASS or ACT, was not compatible with the developmental education instructional redesign models the community colleges are pursuing under several large federal and private grants. Research has shown that different forms of assessment are better suited to measure learning in the redesigned courses.
**CALIFORNIA:** The Campaign for College Opportunity successfully promoted state policies that require community colleges to provide students with orientation and other support services to improve student success. In an historic move toward equity, colleges will be required to publicly report progress of all students broken down by race and socio-economic status. In addition, students will have to maintain satisfactory academic performance in order to be eligible for fee waivers.

The Campaign for College Opportunity also successfully advocated that the California Community Colleges Board of Governors develop system-wide enrollment priority for classes, reflective of the state’s resource-starved environment. The regulations, to be implemented in 2014, are designed to ensure that students who seek job training, degree attainment or transfer will have access to the courses they need for their educational goals. New students who have completed college orientation and assessment, as well as continuing students who have developed education plans, will have priority over students who do not meet these criteria. Additionally, The Campaign made sure to require districts to adopt an appeals process for students who lose priority due to circumstances beyond their control, such as accidents or illness.

**COLORADO:** The Bell Policy Center successfully led efforts in Colorado to assist low-income adults in obtaining certificates, degrees and credentials—essential criteria for obtaining good jobs.

- The “Higher Ed Prior Learning Assessments” bill requires Colorado’s public postsecondary institutions to adopt programs for granting academic credit for students’ prior college-level learning gained outside of the classroom through employment, military service or independent study.

- The “Skills for Jobs Act” will help match industry’s need for skilled workers to the training provided in a broad range of Colorado postsecondary education and workforce programs. The legislation directs the Colorado Department of Higher Education to coordinate with other state agencies and private sector organizations in developing annual reports that identify the state’s workforce needs, postsecondary credential production, the gap between the two and potential actions that will help to close the gap. The report will count the full scope of postsecondary credentials awarded in Colorado—not just certificates and degrees—and identify those areas in which new or expanded efforts are needed.

In addition, the Bell championed state policy that better aligns Colorado’s basic skills education (also referred to as remedial or developmental education) and admissions policies and creates new ways for students to improve their college-level skills through supplemental instruction while continuing to make progress toward degree completion. A new act also clarifies the state’s power to regulate private higher education institutions including private for-profit colleges.

The Bell was vocal in its opposition to $30 million in proposed cuts to need-based financial aid. Their voice helped restore those proposed cuts.
District of Columbia: DC Appleseed chaired an official Advisory Board whose task was to recommend a path to independence for the local community college, currently a division of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). The D.C. Council adopted the recommendations of the Advisory Board and enacted legislation that requires the University to:

1. Produce a right sizing plan by October 1, 2012 to address its fiscal pressures; and
2. Submit by November 1, 2012, an application to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), the regional accrediting body, to recognize the community college as a branch campus of the University as a first step toward independent accreditation.

The D.C. Council also allocated $14.4 million to the Community College as a line item in the UDC budget, and directed the University to grant the Community College authority over its tuition revenue, anticipated to be about $7 million. This spending authority is necessary for recognition by MSCHE as a branch.

DC Appleseed also successfully advocated for the local Department of Employment Services (DOES) to collect data on job placement, job retention and wages of participants in locally funded training programs so the District can identify successes and areas for improvement. Legislation passed by the D.C. Council in 2012 now requires such data to be collected on a quarterly basis and publicly reported on DOES’s website. In addition, DC Appleseed participated in the development of the WIA/Wagner-Peyser Five Year State Plan and successfully advocated for including data-driven decision making as a focal point of the plan.

Access to and completion of a postsecondary degree or credential is a key ingredient to economic mobility.

DC Appleseed participated in the development of regulations, published in final form in July 2012, that establish training and registration requirements for Home Health Aides and certification requirements for the programs that train them. These regulations, the first in a series addressing the Board of Nursing’s oversight of Nursing Assistive Personnel, lay the groundwork for a career lattice with a set of stackable credentials that lead to increasingly lucrative healthcare jobs.

Massachusetts: Despite a tough fiscal climate, Crittenton Women’s Union (CWU) played a pivotal role in the inclusion of $5 million for the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund (WCTF), which prepares Massachusetts residents for new jobs in high-demand occupations, helps close the middle-skills gap and creates seamless pathways to employment. The Fund will increase economic development and create jobs in the Commonwealth’s key sectors of innovation and infrastructure.

In addition to the $5 million direct appropriation to the WCTF, the act also:

• Requires the state’s Workforce Investment Board, in consultation with the president of the Commonwealth Corporation, to undertake an annual review of local and regional labor market information in order to develop regional plans that coordinate...
training and education activities to target employer needs and meet the Commonwealth’s demand for workers.

- Establishes a middle-skill subcommittee of the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund advisory board.

- Establishes a Massachusetts Advanced Manufacturing Collaborative and Commonwealth Advanced Manufacturing Futures program that, as part of their missions, will develop and implement sector-based worker training and talent pipelines.

Crittenton Women’s Union, joined by many other nonprofit advocates, led a statewide effort in highlighting the exploitative practices engaged in by some for-profit vocational schools that result in extraordinary student debt and a high default rate. The state approved legislation that strengthens state oversight and regulation of for-profit vocational schools to better protect students.

CWU also successfully advocated for $3.25 million in new support for Massachusetts students studying and/or training to fill vacant positions in high-demand occupations. The In-Demand Scholarship is a new program that allows students studying in high-demand occupations at state universities and community colleges to access scholarships. This is huge victory as this program contains similar elements to the Educational Rewards Grant Program that helped increase access to education and training for low-income, non-traditional students.

**Maryland:** In an effort to improve access to good jobs for under-represented and disadvantaged populations, the Job Opportunities Task Force successfully advocated for a state policy that directs the Maryland Department of Transportation (MD DoT) to allocate 0.5 percent of federal transportation funds to develop, conduct and administer construction training and supportive services, including skill improvement programs. The MD DoT will work with the Governor’s Workforce Investment Board to administer the training programs in workforce investment areas across the state. This new policy should allow over $1 million into new training programs for low-skill workers.

**Mississippi:** The Mississippi Economic Policy Center (MEPC) successfully advocated for the preservation of $1.5 million in state Dropout Recovery Funds that go to support adult basic education and GED programs across the state. The resources were distributed to Mississippi’s 15 community college campuses to hire faculty, cover test fees and provide academic and non-academic support to students in adult basic education and GED programs. MEPC provided education to state leaders on Dropout Recovery Funds through an issue brief, opinion pieces and regular blog writing.
NEBRASKA: Nebraska Appleseed was instrumental in the state’s adoption of a pilot educational bridge program that will provide competitive grants for low-skill adults to improve their education and skill attainment that results in certificates in high-demand industries. Bridge programs are structured career pathways, developed in partnership with adult basic education providers and nonprofit social services organizations, which assist adults in obtaining academic and technical skills necessary for success in postsecondary programs, workforce training and the labor market.

The program will be administered by the Department of Education, Adult Education Division. The competitively awarded pilots will be funded with at least $200,000 a year for the next three years from the Education Innovation Fund. Priority will be given to programs that leverage additional funds and programs that serve public assistance beneficiaries.

NEW YORK: When the GED Testing Service announced a new version of the GED exam that could increase the cost of taking the exam and possibly reduce already low pass rates, the Center for an Urban Future (CUF) encouraged New York State to consider alternative ways to achieve high school equivalency credentials. CUF published an op-ed in the Albany Times-Union, met numerous times with State Education Department leaders and convened a WPFP-sponsored conference that brought together adult education providers with state legislators, the state deputy commissioner for adult education and the deputy director of the GED Testing Service.

The New York State Board of Regents has sided with CUF by voting to adopt and launch an alternate high school equivalency exam. The Regents have also supported CUF’s recommendation to eliminate the statutory ban on charging a fee for the GED, which gives it an unfair advantage over other exams, in favor of a flat subsidy for all high school equivalency exams.

NORTH CAROLINA: The North Carolina Justice Center successfully led efforts to include important information about adult worker access and training—including the role of credentials and work supports in ensuring that employment outcomes result in family-sustaining wages—in a legislative program evaluation study that will help reorganize and strengthen the workforce development system to better serve North Carolina’s low-skill workers.
State policies that help families move out of poverty include supports that allow families to obtain work and advance in their jobs—childcare, skills training, and unemployment insurance. WPFP’s state partners promote state program practices and policies to assure that adults struggling to find work—including public beneficiaries and workers who lose jobs through no fault of their own—and those in low-wage jobs have the supports that promote family stability and workforce success.

**COLORADO:** The Bell Policy Center helped address the devastating “cliff” effects of the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP). New legislation establishes a pilot program in which up to 10 counties can voluntarily allow CCCAP recipients who have exceeded the county-set eligibility limit to stay on the program for an additional two years paying a gradually increasing share of their assisted child care.

The Bell supported state policy that will allow unemployed Coloradans to be able to take advantage of increased training opportunities. Now Colorado will extend enhanced unemployment benefits for eligible claimants enrolled in approved training programs. Approved training is expanded to include employer-based and entrepreneurial training programs, which have been found to be cost-effective policies for helping unemployed workers move into employment. As of May 2012, about $7.8 million remained from a 2009 law that the state can now use for training through June 30, 2014.

**MAINE:** The Maine Center for Economic Policy in partnership with Maine Equal Justice Partners supported efforts to extend access to postsecondary education for TANF recipients. Through administrative rule-making, Maine’s Department of Health and Human Services proposed capping TANF extensions permissible for recipients in education/training programs. The proposed rule said enrollment in an approved education/training program was a permissible reason to remain on TANF longer than 60 months. This capped extension made it impossible for someone in Parents as Scholars or other approved education/training programs to complete a four-year degree. As a result of the education efforts, the final rule was written without a cap on the number of extensions that can be granted for a TANF recipient in an approved education/training program.

**MICHIGAN:** The Michigan League for Public Policy worked directly with proponents of an Unemployment Insurance work-sharing bill, including providing their offices with data and policy information and coordinating with the sponsors to have op-eds published in several targeted media outlets. The League undertook other advocacy on work-sharing as well. In July, a work-sharing bill was passed by the Michigan Legislature and signed by the governor. This will reduce the number of workers who experience full job loss.
**NEBRASKA:** Nebraska Appleseed successfully led efforts to adopt two policies that will help TANF participants increase their educational attainment and give them the tools to increase their economic mobility. NE Appleseed helped:

- Extend a state policy that was due to expire that allows program participants to engage in vocational training that leads to a diploma, an associate’s degree or a certificate for 36 months, rather than the federally allowed 12 months; and

- Allow participants under the age of 24 to pursue a high school diploma or GED to fulfill work requirements.

**NORTH CAROLINA:** The North Carolina Justice Center helped preserve benefits to workers who have lost their jobs by staving off proposed cuts in the unemployment systems that would have reduced the weekly benefit and shortened the number of weeks a worker could collect. They also produced a report on how to maintain the solvency of the unemployment insurance system.

**WASHINGTON:** The Statewide Poverty Action Network successfully advocated for restoring the income eligibility level for subsidized childcare to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, assuring that children of working low-income parents have access to quality childcare.

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Endnotes

i Low income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.


v Population Reference Bureau’s analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2010 American Community Survey.


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Launched in 2002 and currently supported by The Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Kresge foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve the economic conditions of working low-income families. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their policy efforts to better prepare America’s working families for a more secure economic future.

**For more information:**

[www.workingpoorfamilies.org](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org)