

PROJECT OVERVIEW  
JUNE 2019

# The High Road to the Public Sector

Worker Education and Resource Center (WERC) is a high road training partnership (H RTP) that, since 2000, has collaborated with public service employers to improve the lives of workers with multiple barriers in Los Angeles County, through workforce development and partnership. WERC initially partnered with public sector safety-net healthcare employers, including county hospitals, and community health centers during a period of unprecedented statewide healthcare reform leading up to the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010. WERC's goal was to create and promote workforce development programming that both improved access to healthcare jobs and the quality of patient care. As an intermediary between labor and management, WERC plays a critical role in shaping the discourse around the effectiveness and quality of workforce development efforts in Los Angeles.

After the passage of the Affordable Care Act, WERC developed extensive experience and expertise designing and implementing training and educational programs that addressed the increased demand for frontline workers and new delivery-of-care models. WERC's labor partner, the Service Employees International Union Local 721 (SEIU 721) was in the forefront during this period of healthcare sector growth and change. WERC provided workforce development services to over 25,000 workers.

To fill in-demand healthcare positions, WERC grounds its work in cultural affinity principles by recruiting and training workers with lived experiences similar to those of the patient population. Community members with high barriers to employment are connected with employers who offer quality entry-level jobs with good pay, benefits, and career pathways, and incumbent workers are provided opportunities for upskilling and reskilling.

With support from the CWDB's H RTP initiative, WERC transitioned from a focus on the healthcare sector, to creating the first H RTP model with a county government in California. WERC is preparing workers to fill entry-level jobs in several County departments in the County of Los Angeles, the largest public sector employer in the region. Prepare LA for County Employment (PLACE) will create hiring, training, onboarding, mentoring, and apprenticeship systems to increase the opportunity for residents with high barriers to employment, including a history of incarceration or homelessness, to obtain permanent county jobs.

In addition, WERC created LA EMT to address equity issues in the Emergency Medical Technician occupation (EMTs) by piloting the first EMT apprenticeship in South Los Angeles for men and women from the Black and Latinx community. EMT is also a pre-requisite to become a LA County firefighter, which has is still primarily a white male occupation.

Through PLACE, WERC is addressing employer issues such as equity and an aging workforce. WERC incorporates a nontraditional assessment and a health and wellness approach in their pre-employment training program. By including intense psychosocial counseling and professional development, WERC is preparing community representatives who have lived experience with poverty, homelessness, incarceration, mental illness, addiction, or ethnic/racial discrimination to succeed.

WERC is influencing the workforce development field in Los Angeles in three significant ways.

## **CREATING TRAINING TO BUILD A CULTURALLY REPRESENTATIVE FRONTLINE PUBLIC SERVICE WORKFORCE**

WERC has developed a health- and wellness-informed, pre-employment training curriculum for EMTs and other frontline workers to prepare individuals from underserved communities for employment with high road safety-net employers. The goal is not only to provide employment but to enhance the quality of public service by culturally aligning the workforce with the population it serves.

## DESIGNING PILOT PROGRAMS TO MAKE LA COUNTY JOBS MORE EQUITABLE

WERC is forming partnerships with 15 LA County departments to develop and pilot programs based on occupational demand that will prepare people with high barriers to employment for permanent County jobs and career pathways.

## CREATING PATHWAYS INTO COUNTY CAREERS INFORMED BY A COMPREHENSIVE LABOR AND EQUITY ANALYSIS

WERC is informing the County of Los Angeles on how to upskill workers and connect job seekers to career-pathway programs, stable occupations, and high road employment. WERC's research is informed by an equity audit of county occupational classifications, labor market analysis, and a review of the county's workforce development programs.

Ultimately, LA County and safety-net healthcare employers will gain culturally competent, well-trained workers to meet the demand for frontline workers. Job seekers of diverse backgrounds will gain access to good, entry-level jobs through counseling, career exploration, and skills and professional development programs.

**The California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) designed the High Road Training Partnership (H RTP) initiative to model a sector approach that can address critical issues of equity, job quality, and environmental sustainability. H RTPs are industry-based, worker-focused training partnerships that build skills for California's high road employers—firms that compete based on quality of product and service achieved through innovation and investment in human capital and can thus generate family-supporting jobs where workers have agency and voice.**

**For more information, see  
<https://cwdb.ca.gov/initiatives/high-road-training-partnerships/>**

## THE EVOLUTION OF WERC: A BRIEF TIMELINE

### LA County partners with SEIU 721

LA County and SEIU 721 create a partnership to address the crisis in healthcare services and obtain a US Department of Labor (DOL) grant to develop a restructuring and retraining program.

### LA DHS and SEIU 721 receive \$40M workforce grant

LA DHS and SEIU 721 obtain \$40M in workforce development funds from the State and Local Workforce Investment Act to prepare workers for in-demand occupations in healthcare, primarily nursing. WERC expands to provide pathways into allied health careers.

### LA DHS partners with WERC to prep for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

In partnership with LA DHS, WERC implements workshops for workers on ACA benefits and how to ensure a positive patient experience.

### WERC launches community health trainings

WERC launches several Community Health Worker Programs with LA DHS, LA Department of Mental Health, Rancho Los Amigos Rehabilitation Center, and community health centers.

### WERC launches LA EMT program

WERC creates the LA EMT program in partnership with the LA County Fire Department, McCormick Ambulance, and the LA County Second Supervisorial District, to address equity issues.

1999

2001

2002

2008

2010

2012

2015

2016

2017

### WERC is founded

LA County Department of Health Services (LA DHS) and SEIU 721 establish WERC, a nonprofit 501(c)(3), to create and implement the Health Care Workforce Development Program.

### WERC pilots green programs

WERC pilots new green programs regarding retrofit of County buildings. WERC's green custodial trainign teaches how to reduce waste, use safer chemicals, and improve infection control in county hospitals.

### DOL and State of California certify health worker apprenticeship

WERC registers the Community Health Worker Apprenticeship Program with the US DOL Office of Apprenticeship and the California Division of Apprenticeship Standards and conducts the first Care Navigator Apprenticeship Program.

### LA DHS and SEIU 721 create Labor Management Transformation Council

LA DHS and SEIU 721 create the Labor Management Transformation Council and direct WERC to develop workshops on labor-management committees, safe work cultures, and bullying prevention.

### WERC creates public sector H RTP

WERC creates PLACE, a high road training partnership with the LA County Chief Executive Office, to prepare people with high barriers to employment for permanent jobs and career pathways.

# Industry Partnerships: Where Demand Meets Supply

The County of Los Angeles is the largest single employer in the region, employing more than 112,000 people in 37 departments. The county provides good jobs that are stable, well paid, unionized, and with career paths. A recent study by the Los Angeles Times compared 2014 public and private sector pay and found that more than half of public sector positions represented by SEIU 721 pay more than double the median salary of similar full-time, private sector jobs in LA County. For example, a city janitor's median annual wage is \$23,944 more than that of a janitor who works in the private sector. The county is a stable source of employment with hundreds of job opportunities for those with barriers to employment, such as poverty, unemployment, and homelessness, and who may be underrepresented in county positions.

However, the county's workforce is aging, creating a greater demand for operational positions. According to a report published by WERC, 13% of county employees are projected to retire within the next five years and in certain classifications, this number increases to 20%. A major obstacle to meeting this demand is the county's civil service hiring process and employment requirements, which can be difficult for applicants with barriers to employment. For example, civil service jobs often require an online application and a written test, which can be challenging for those who lack access to computers and the internet or who have limited language skills.

WERC's partners implement solutions to industry problems by identifying workforce development mechanisms and strategies that respond to the needs of the civil service system. As industry leaders, employers and union representatives coordinate efforts to ensure goals within their industries are met.

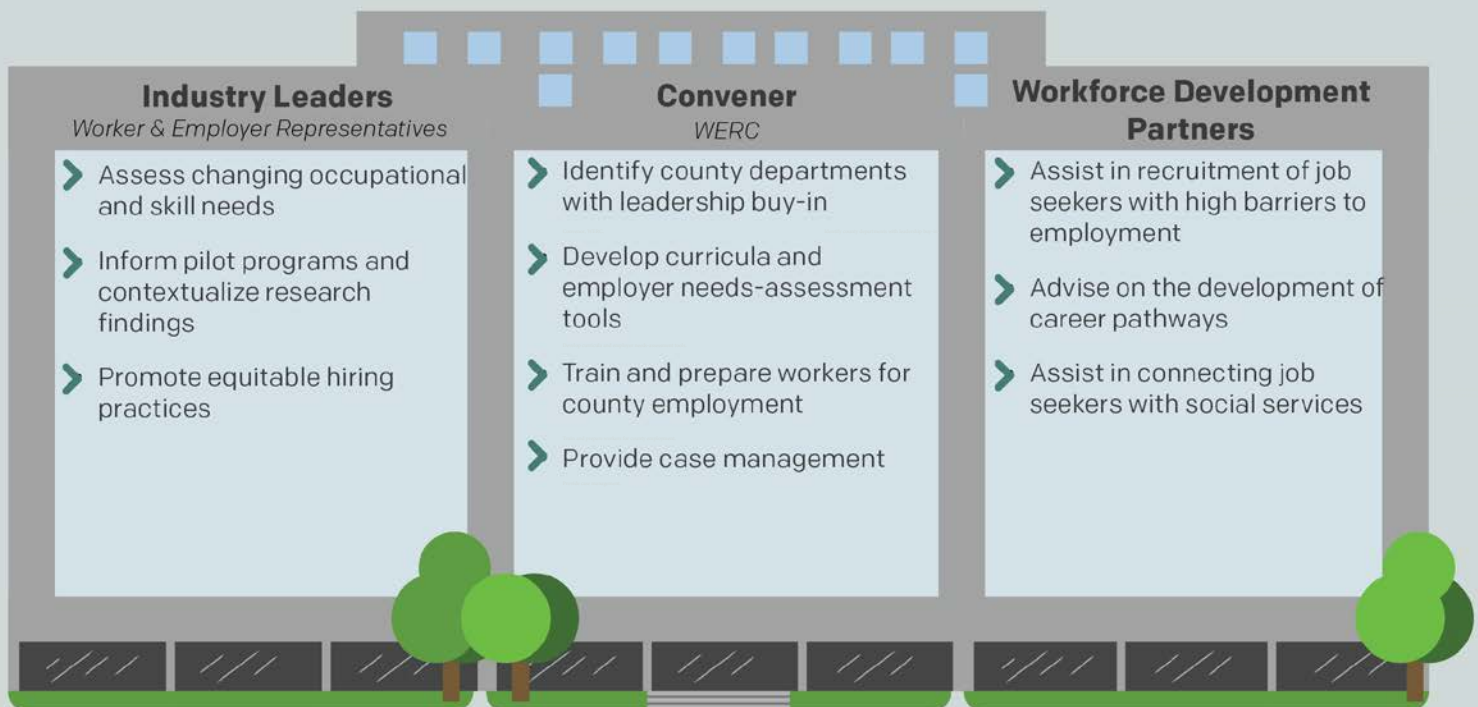
HRTPs engage in deep conversations about the future of work and collectively develop industry solutions. On the demand side, industry leaders identify shared needs, challenges, and goals and in response, intermediaries make solutions actionable by identifying workforce development mechanisms on the supply side.

- On the supply side, WERC is improving access to good, long-term, jobs for the most economically distressed populations women and people of color who live in zip codes that have high rates of unemployment and underemployment and low median household incomes.
- On the demand side, WERC is advancing a High Road Training Partnership model with county departments and aligning the county's internal hiring practices to improve community representation in county jobs.

The county is an ideal employer to establish a High Road Training Partnership as the infrastructure model for innovative workforce development. For WERC, workforce development starts with jobs. By conducting an intensive, partnership-based, labor-market analysis, WERC was able to identify occupational classifications that need to be filled. Next, WERC focused on employer engagement to identify champions and those who will assist in carrying out the work. Mentors are then identified to assist with retention and job readiness in the form of pre-employment and pre-apprenticeship training followed by individual case management. WERC's comprehensive workforce development approach ensures that job seekers gain the skills necessary to meet county employment qualifications and successfully secure county jobs.

*Fig 1. WERC Partner Roles*

As an intermediary, WERC convenes industry leaders to address demand-side problems and organizes partners to address the supply side of the public sector labor market.



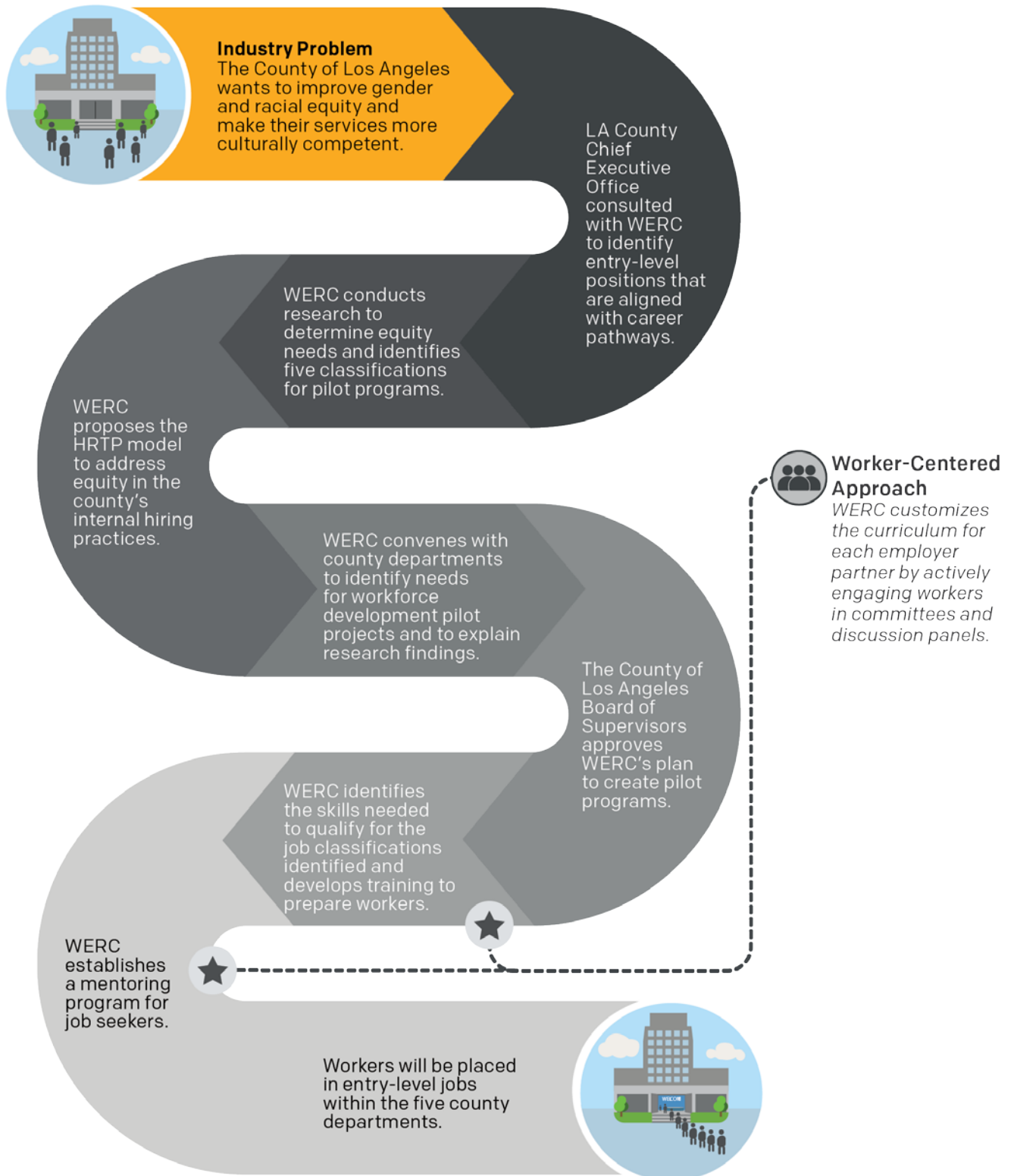
Intermediaries collaborate with existing workforce development providers, such as workforce boards, community colleges, adult schools, community-based organizations, job centers, and social service agencies. WERC has a unique role as both the intermediary and training provider. As the workforce development specialist, WERC creates and runs training programs; as the convener, WERC brokers and nurtures relationships between partner organizations.

For the Los Angeles EMT pilot program, WERC partnered with Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas's office, McCormick Ambulance, and the Los Angeles County Fire Department to help meet the demand for high-quality care in California by supplying employers with a well-trained, diverse pool of emergency medical professionals from the community who mirror the population they serve. Modeled after the nationally recognized Alameda Emergency Medical Service Corps Program, the LA EMT program combines skills instruction with mentorship, health and wellness healing circles and counseling, cultural role models, and academic preparation. The program focuses on personal transformation and growth along with obtaining the skills to become an EMT or transition into another healthcare career. In addition to helping meet demand for EMTs, WERC is helping diversify the healthcare workforce with medical emergency professionals from the community, for the community.



Fig 2. WERC's High Road Approach in the County of Los Angeles

WERC is partnering with the County of Los Angeles to increase opportunities for residents with high barriers to employment to qualify for civil service jobs and successfully complete the hiring process.





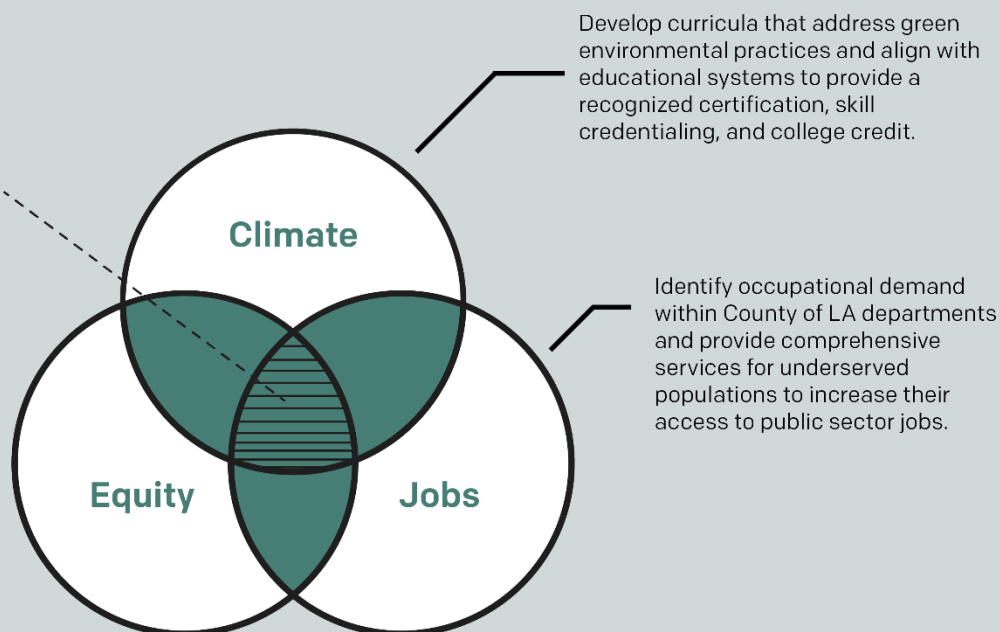
# Taking the High Road: Improving Equity, Job Quality, and Climate Resilience

To advance equity and job quality within LA County departments, WERC conducted a robust assessment of existing workforce development programs and a survey of projected needs to identify in-demand occupations. Research activities included a labor market analysis, an audit of contracts to identify low road employers, and a mapping exercise to identify career pathways in areas with budgeted vacant positions. WERC also conducted focus groups and interviews with industry leaders to identify opportunities for job seekers with the greatest vulnerabilities and highest barriers to entry-level positions.

Fig 3. Taking the High Road: Improving Equity, Job Quality, and Climate Resilience

**WERC is advancing high road training partnerships within county departments to address occupational vacancies, improve equity and cultural competency, and create opportunities for workers facing the greatest barriers to employment.**

Train and prepare culturally competent workers who have lived experience with poverty, homelessness, incarceration, mental illness, addiction, or ethnic/racial discrimination, using a health and wellness approach—including intense psychosocial counseling—and professional development to fill positions aligned with employer demand.



By taking the high road, WERC is leading the way in building a better future for public sector workers in California. WERC facilitates discussions among partners on implementation strategies that integrate the Equity, Climate, and Jobs (ECJ) approach and meet the supply and demand needs of the county.

## **ADVANCING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

Typically, workforce development opportunities are focused on upper-management cultivation and promotion and not on workers in lower pay scales. By focusing on equity and inclusion, WERC is creating opportunities within the LA County service sector for entry-level workers, underrepresented populations, and job seekers with barriers to employment to access quality, stable jobs with career ladders.

The LA EMT pilot program exemplifies WERC's commitment to equity. This program trains and mentors young adults from South Los Angeles to become EMTs, a first step in an emergency healthcare career path. Through the five-month program, participants are exposed to the EMT occupation and the career pathways the training can lead to. Through academic preparation, technical training, tutoring, life-skills training, case management, and health and wellness support, the program provides participants with the tools and support networks to be role models in their communities. Successful program participants return to serve their communities as emergency healthcare professionals with local ambulance companies, fire and rescue organizations, hospitals, and government agencies. The LA EMT program is designed to encourage personal transformation and growth and provide training and skills credentialing so young people of color can enter the health field.

In addition to providing career pathways, the EMT program addresses racial and gender equity issues in the healthcare sector. Only 2 in 10 EMTs and paramedics in the United States are people of color, and only 3 in 10 are women, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Recruitment and retention are also an ongoing problem for Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers. Ambulance companies experience high turnover rates because the EMT occupation is often a stepping stone into emergency and health services careers such as firefighting, paramedics, and nursing. For employers, the EMT program creates a steady stream of qualified and competent employees; for participants, the program makes a career in healthcare accessible; and for South Los Angeles, the program trains emergency medical service providers from and for the community.

The LA EMT pilot program demonstrates how high road training partnerships tackle issues of equity by creating workforce development strategies that address occupational shortages and at the same time improve equity and cultural competency. The LA EMT pilot program is creating a model for training programs

designed for people of color who have traditionally been excluded from workforce development programs and employment opportunities.

## **BUILDING ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE**

WERC is developing curricula that address green environmental practices in the workplace—including water conservation, dry landscaping, and waste reduction—in the context of a career pathway and aligned with educational systems to ensure recognized certification and skills credentialing.

WERC's healthcare pathways are building a perfect nexus between climate and economic resilience. The direct health burdens of climate and environmental decline disproportionately impact poor people and people of color. So the work of PLACE to train health workers who can effectively serve their communities and WERC's training and apprenticeship model for navigators and other allied health workers improves not only health but also economic opportunity for those communities. Navigators improve the delivery of care to their communities and gain access to pathways to opportunities for upward mobility.

WERC uses adult and worker education principles integrated into the customized curriculum for each employer partner. The curricula for the five pilot programs incorporate participation and feedback from labor and management from the targeted county departments. Supervisors and work site organizers enrich the classroom experience by participating on panel discussions, guest lecturing, and leading site visits at the work locations. WERC also builds confidence by recognizing the life and work experience the students bring into the classroom. WERC provides case management and classroom support using a trauma-informed practice model that was developed through its EMT program.

Integral to WERC's development of curricula and program implementation are workers. Worker voice is a valuable resource that informs and guides the implementation of environmental practices and related career training. While WERC is advancing and promoting environmental practices through training and education, workers are sharing those practices at work and in their communities.

Workers learn about and apply environmental practices on the job - such as water conservation, waste reduction, and cleaning methods and products that have less environmental impact and are less detrimental to workers' health—and they share them at work and in the community to help individuals and households reduce their carbon footprint. education, workers are sharing those practices at work and in their communities. Workers learn about and apply environmental practices on the job—such as water conservation, waste reduction, and cleaning methods and products

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WERC is developing a climate change curriculum and training specifically for grounds maintenance and related fields. With resources from the county's Measure W parcel tax - which will generate an estimated \$300 million in annual revenue to pay for infrastructure and programs to capture rainwater and improve water quality - WERC plans to train the first generation of the county's climate-conscious workforce in the grounds and landscape maintenance and custodial services sectors.

## **DELIVERING SKILLS FOR QUALITY JOBS**

In August 2017, WERC completed a labor market industry analysis and equity audit to address the underrepresentation of county employees by gender, ethnicity and other demographic characteristics, and also the occupational needs of unionized and growth employers, primarily the County of Los Angeles. Partner input was instrumental in helping shape WERC's workforce development strategy and in identifying opportunities for improvements in county employment. WERC met with over 70 operational staff at 15 county departments to discuss the research findings and collect recommendations on possible pilot projects.

WERC determined the top five classification groups with the highest demand based on projected retirement within five years, low prior work experience requirements, and few educational barriers: 1) apprenticeships and crafts, 2) Public Works laborers and grounds maintenance workers, 3) custodians, 4) clerical and typist clerical positions, and 5) firefighter trainees. For each of the five pilot programs, WERC plays an active role in transitioning participants from training programs into permanent county employment by offering comprehensive services that help ensure participant wellness and the skills to succeed throughout the program and into the future.

Through training, education, and case management, WERC is preparing underserved community members to transition into stable employment with family-supporting wages and fringe benefits. To ensure industry demand is met, WERC convenes regularly with county departments such as Human Resources, Probation, Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services, Employee Relations, and Classification/Compensation and is looking to expand system partners. By promoting high-quality workforce development services, WERC is demonstrating that a H RTP can work with public sector employer and union partners.

# Expanding the High Road

An H RTP in the public sector does not just respond to supply and demand, but addresses high unemployment and persistent poverty in certain populations in the community. H RTP allows LA County and SEIU to extend a pathway to the middle class for marginalized groups. LA County, as the largest employer in the region, is extending a pathway to a high road job by creating a high quality workforce development program that provides excellent case management, training, and job matching. WERC has created the model that supports people with high barriers securing employment, and brings value to the employer by improving the community-based culturally aligned public service. Through PLACE, WERC is building partnerships to facilitate the adoption of a high road approach to LA County's hiring practices that is guided by principles of equity and inclusion. To continue to build the high road in the public sector, WERC will expand and strengthen its H RTP in these ways:

## **PARTNERSHIP OPERATIONS**

WERC will institutionalize pilot programs, incorporate worker voice in their programming and formal structures, expand its employer and union partners within the county, and obtain accreditation and credentialing for its emerging occupational programs.

## **INDUSTRY SYSTEMS CHANGE**

WERC will develop career pathways for entry-level jobs, create a culture shift toward greater equity and inclusion, and advance the H RTP model and equitable hiring practices within county departments and beyond.

## **SOCIAL IMPACT**

WERC will encourage civic engagement and help improve the health and stability of workers, their families, and communities

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# About this Series

Through the H RTP initiative, the CWDB has invested close to \$10 million to develop, refine, and expand a series of skill-focused, industry-based training partnerships that advance equity by linking workforce innovation to regional challenges of job quality, economic mobility, and environmental sustainability. The UCLA Labor Center, commissioned by the CWDB, is leading a two-year evaluation process to understand the successes and challenges of the funded partnerships in building a workforce infrastructure that can holistically address key issues related to equity, climate, and jobs. This is one of a series of eight partnership overviews from UCLA evaluators Ana Luz Gonzalez-Vasquez, Magaly Lopez, and Saba Waheed. For additional overviews and more information about the H RTP initiative, see <https://cwdb.ca.gov/initiatives/high-road-training-partnerships/>.

