

GETTING THE WORD OUT

**STRATEGIES & THEMES FOR
D4AD COMMENTARIES,
OP-EDS & BLOGS**

JUNE 2020

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AD**

NCHEMS

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide—developed by CommunicationWorks, L.L.C. for the Data for the American Dream (D4AD) project—is designed to help D4AD and other initiatives develop commentaries, op-eds and blogs to advance improvements in workforce development and introduce new tools, resources, and supports for vulnerable workers and jobseekers.

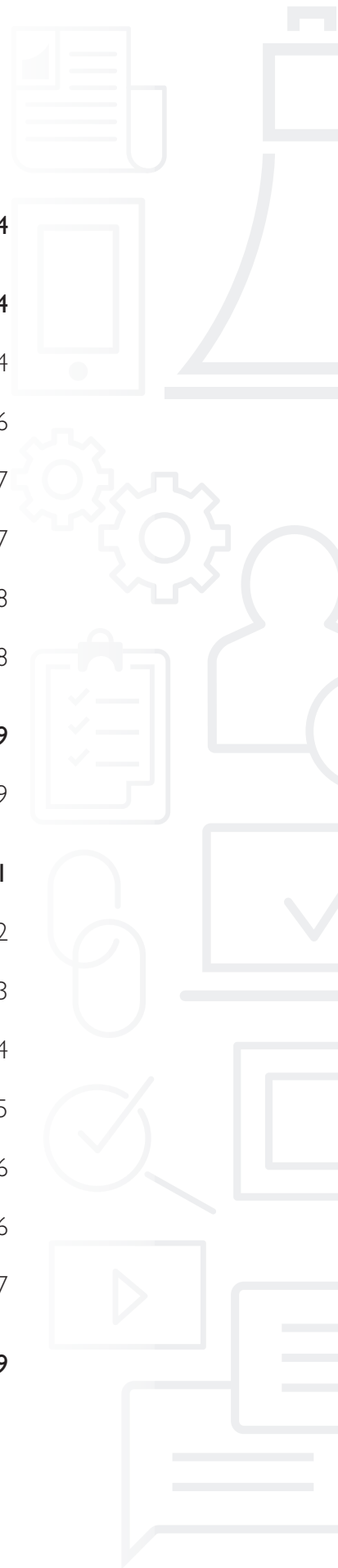
ABOUT DATA FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

Data for the American Dream (D4AD) is a consortium bringing together Schmidt Futures, Lumina Foundation, Walmart Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. D4AD currently funds pilot initiatives in three states (Colorado, Michigan, and New Jersey) that will help provide low-income, lower-skilled, underemployed, and unemployed workers access to current and actionable data, enlisting local case managers from public and private agencies to counsel jobseekers, help them access needed services, and reach the most underserved populations. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) is the implementation partner of D4AD. NCHEMS is a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve strategic decision making in postsecondary education for states, systems, institutions, and workforce development organizations in the United States and abroad.



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INTRODUCTION

Throughout every phase of the D4AD initiative—from design and launch to implementation—employment advocates and job centers can use op-eds, blogs, and articles to make the case for providing more effective approaches to help low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed and underemployed workers learn about tools and resources available to help them find work, education and training, and career pathways. They can also help build support with key and influential audiences. Posting blogs on influential sites, placing articles in trade publications, and publishing op-ed pieces in major dailies, can be effective methods of explaining complicated issues and drawing attention to new approaches that can help workforce development—in particular when you feel that your message will not be communicated adequately through regular news coverage. Publication in these venues can provide instant visibility for your ideas among policymakers, opinion leaders, workforce development advocates, and the public. But the competition for space and editorial requirements demand that writers target pieces to the requirements of each publication, meet a high threshold of news value, speak directly to the audience, and present provocative new ideas in compelling ways.

This document provides strategic communications guidance for framing, developing, and posting or placing pieces, and provides themes that can attract notice as a basis for generating your own customized pieces based on your purpose, audience, and the vehicle or desired outlet.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Too often commentaries, op-eds, and blog posts are generated in a vacuum. Someone has a “good idea” and generates a piece based on that idea without first considering:

- **Who** you want to influence and who is the best messenger to reach the audience;
- **What** you want to accomplish (what you want the audience to know, do, and feel);
- **Where** the piece might be placed;
- **When** the piece should ideally be placed;
- **Why** a publication or organization might want to publish the piece and what’s new and salient about what you are adding to the debate; and
- How to reach out to editors and organizations to place pieces.

Below are a series of questions and suggestions to consider in each area that can be used in conjunction with the Commentary Planning Grid included in Appendix A, which will help you work through the interrelations of each category. For instance, you may think you want to reach a particular audience, but once you focus on your purpose your audience may change, as may where you think about placing the piece.

Who are you trying to reach?

D4AD initiatives will have several audiences that will be important to reach and influence at different points in the process. Only in rare cases, such as a landing page for a website, will your communications be oriented toward a generic audience (or all of your audiences at one time). More often, you will want to target messages to specific audiences to demonstrate how the initiative is meeting their unique needs.

- **Workers and jobseekers**—in particular, those who are low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed or underemployed—who are looking for reliable and accessible resources that can help them find a better job, provide timely access to education and training, and open up opportunities for advancement that will put them on the path to financial stability. While an obvious audience for outreach, these workers can also be hard to reach and so require careful identification of partner organizations and publications that might be best suited to reach workers.
- **Particular communities** that include workers your initiative is targeting who need resources and supports relating to job training and career development. These may be based on demographics focusing on race/ethnicity, gender, or age, or they may be based on geography focusing on rural communities, or urban centers, etc.

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- **Policymakers and agency staff** who you may want to provide resources or become champions for the initiative or who can advocate for key aspects of the work. Demonstrating how the initiative will benefit specific localities, regions, and the state, and make processes more efficient and effective, will be key for this audience. Policymakers may be more influenced by key constituents or business and industry leaders than by direct appeals from initiative leaders, so consider carefully who might byline the piece.
 - **Employers** who work closely with workforce development agencies and have a story to tell about the benefits for their company can help widen the circle of supportive employers for the initiative, who in turn can serve as influencers with policymakers and other organizations.
 - **Community organizations** that are focused on social and economic equality, work with particular demographic groups, or advocate for particular communities within a city or region. Conveying how working with the initiative will benefit the community organization is key. As with employers, identifying leaders of community organizations who are respected and seen as influencers is an important strategy in identifying messengers that can carry the D4AD message.
 - **Other experts and advocates in the workforce development and higher education fields** who can learn from what D4AD is doing in your region or may want to start an initiative where they are. Key messengers for these audiences are experts and prominent leaders in their fields or colleagues who lead the initiatives themselves.
 - **The general public** is not typically a “target” audience as it is too wide and diverse a group to consider as a single audience. However, it is always important in writing pieces such as these to keep in mind that even when targeting a particular audience there will be a wider audience who will read the piece, have opinions, and potentially influence others’ views on the issue. As a result, it is always important to keep this context in mind.

What are you trying to accomplish?

Articles and blogs about D4AD might have any number of purposes, including:

- **Making the case for the need for the tools, resources, and approach D4AD promotes by:**
 - demonstrating the need for better strategies and policies to bolster education and training opportunities that lead to better career pathways and economic stability of workers,
 - making a general case to for a more skilled and competitive workforce and how D4AD can make a difference,
 - demonstrating how these approaches provide broad community benefits, from increased earning power for workers and tax revenue to decreased reliance on public services.

- **Promoting the D4AD initiative launch and implementation by:**

- demonstrating how D4AD is different from previous workforce development efforts, including how it builds on existing tools and processes that work but provides a new approach to help workers and jobseekers,
- articulating the concrete benefits to the targeted audiences,
- providing clear guidance on how to access tools, resources, and get more information.

- **Demonstrating progress and the benefits of the initiative by focusing on:**

- leading indicators of success and implications for workers, economic development, bolstering the workforce development system,
- stories of workers who have used the tools and resources and improved their employment situation, employers who have benefitted from more skilled applicants that match their needs, and policymakers and community leaders who can validate that the effort has strong benefits and is sound policy and a good investment,
- benefits to communities whose members have improved their economic standing, helped stabilize their families, and strengthened the overall community.

- **Advocating for continue support and expansion, which might include making the case for the:**

- socioeconomic benefits of the initiative to particular communities, cities or regions and the state as a whole,
- improved efficiencies in the workforce development system through more centralized and streamlined services,
- reduced long-term reliance on public services.

Where are you going to place your piece?

You will have multiple options when it comes to deciding where commentaries, op-eds, blog posts or articles are to be placed. Those options can range from local and regional newspapers to trade press to community or organizational newsletters to blogs and websites that reach a variety of different audiences dealing with workforce development or social issues such as economic equality. Don't limit your options to the most obvious outlet—typically the local newspaper. While that is often a good outlet for some pieces, there may be other outlets that will reach your target audience and serve your purposes better.

- **Develop a list of potential outlets,** the audiences they reach, when they publish, and their requirements for submission, including deadlines and length of the piece. This will help identify what pieces are best for different outlets and help plan the timing of each. It will also help to familiarize yourself with the outlet, to get a sense of the type of pieces they run, the tone of pieces they publish, and whether or not they have run pieces similar to those you are planning or not.

- **Build relationships with editors at different outlets** by phone, and potentially in person, to let them know about the initiative, how it improves the current system, why the state and funders are investing, and its potential role in improving job prospects for large numbers of workers.
- **Prioritize outlets based on purpose, timing and audiences.** Remember that you don't typically get more than one bite at the apple. If you know you want to aim to place a piece in a particular outlet for a specific purpose, don't use that outlet for a different piece that is less important. For example, you may wish to place a commentary aimed at additional funding in the paper most widely read by policymakers at the beginning of a legislative session so you will want to avoid looking to place something in that outlet until that time.
- **Attend to outlet's social media presence.** In today's digital environment, an outlet's digital presence may be as or more important as their traditional circulation. If your initiative is actively using social media, following outlets and reporters is a good practice in the first place and will allow you to get a sense of how much traction different outlets get on social media platforms.

When do you aim to post or publish?

State labor department officials, workforce development officials, leaders of job centers, and key D4AD partners should consider when to seek publicity based on the lifecycle of the D4AD initiative and crucial moments, such as when:

- you make the tools and resources available to the public;
- the governor wants to draw attention to the needs of workers and the state's response;
- the legislature is in budget negotiations; or,
- public policy issues such as debates over minimum wage are garnering attention.

Sometimes, external factors—an election, a current social or cultural trend or condition, change the entire context of how we look at workforce issues. The recent COVID-19 pandemic is the most extreme example of this. There are also times when published pieces are less likely to garner attention just due to normal circumstances—the dead of summer, major holidays, national elections—but it is useful to think about what pieces you might want to generate over a longer period of time and what times make the best sense for those pieces given what you can and cannot control.

In general, you want to ensure that a piece you are aiming to publish is best used at a particular time in the life cycle of your initiative. Perhaps you are in the development and design phase and you have a great idea for a piece about how innovative the initiative is with a focus on a powerful tool or resource. That piece might be better saved for your launch efforts when your audiences will be able to actually experience that tool or resource. Or you may know that as you operationalize your initiative that you want to focus first on a particular group of workers and then expand to a second group and then a third. Sequencing pieces in the appropriate outlets that will reach those audiences at the time you want to target those groups will make the most sense and requires planning.

Why would an editor want to publish your article?

Too often, those who are not accustomed to writing for publication focus too much on their own products and programs without placing their work in a larger context. The publication's editor automatically will reject "articles" that are merely disguised ads. The challenge of publishing articles is to take the high ground and not be a self-serving promoter for your organization or product. Like good news stories, feature articles and op-ed pieces should:

- Identify the controversy around the issue;
- Present interesting data to provoke interest, challenge current beliefs, and prove a point;
- Draw attention to surprising or counter-intuitive aspects of the subject;
- Make the issues real by providing specific examples that make the point;
- Enable readers to see themselves in the story;
- Make a case using colorful language; and
- Present newsworthy information that ties in with big stories in the news, if possible.

In addition, the pieces should be written for or bylined by the most persuasive messenger available—the one who has the most name recognition, most impressive title, or most relevant experience to attract and convince the readership.

How do you place an op-ed or article?

Once you have written an op-ed or article that you believe is compelling, submit it and then follow up with the appropriate editor. Some papers and publications may invite you to write an op-ed on a workforce development issue if they are aware of your particular expertise. During the conversation, explain why your views would be of value to their readers.

Most daily and weekly papers have an op-ed review process that can take from one to ten days. National trade publications can take even longer. Many papers and publications require "exclusivity," which means they will consider your piece only if you agree not send it to any other paper. You should be aware of any exclusivity clauses before you call or send a piece to other publications, but you can shop around for the best news source to publish your piece, depending on its topic, or submit a piece to another source if it is rejected by your first choice.

You should include a one-page "pitch" letter with your op-ed or article explaining why your opinion should be published, why it is current and relevant, and how your information will be of interest to the publication's readership. A final suggestion: don't get discouraged easily. Good writing is hard work. If your column doesn't make it into your local paper, consider submitting it elsewhere or redrafting it as a letter to the editor, which can also be an effective way to voice your opinions.

Framing the Argument

Whether you are writing for a trade publication, a major regional newspaper, or a community blog, you need to create a focused argument on a topic that will appeal to a broad range of readers. Every piece should convince the reader to adopt a certain point of view by taking a clear position on an issue and making the best case possible. It should present a problem in a new context that is memorable and distinctive, bring the most important facts to bear, sort through myths and fallacies, offer a solution, or show why the author has more credibility on an issue than those who may oppose him.

Suppose that your organization or corporation is about to release a new technology application that helps workers connect to databases, career-development information, and emerging job prospects. Your op-ed piece would probably best begin not by focusing on the technology but perhaps on why it is so difficult for vulnerable workers to land good jobs and the limitations of traditional approaches and support systems to help them. It could then paint a compelling picture of an entirely new way of doing business that is now being used in the local community with proven results.

D4AD CORE MESSAGING

Fundamentally all commentary, op-eds, or blog posts will be promoting the approach and benefits of the Data for the American Dream initiative. Toward that end, the D4AD core messaging documents are a valuable resources in crafting external communications.

Other factors—such as timing and the purpose for placement—should be taken into consideration as well. And you might time the placement of the op-ed or article to coincide with the release of new unemployment numbers or the announcement of a new state workforce initiative.

The point is to bring the best information and thinking you have to bear to make your case. Identify no more than three core messages you want to convey and then consider how you can include key elements that add news value, catch the reader's attention, and serve as starting points for your messages. The following strategies are good to keep in mind in preparing op-ed pieces and articles:

- **Be brief and to the point.** The standard length for most op-eds in major metropolitan newspapers is about 700 – 750 words, but some newspapers may want more or fewer words to fit specific spaces on their op-ed pages. USA Today, for example, requests 500-600 -word pieces, and regional newspapers often want pieces about that length. Trade publications often run longer pieces, usually about 1,000 words. Some newspapers, such as the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post, have special weekly sections in their Sunday editions that use essays of 1,500 words.
- **Have a forceful lead.** Make your strongest, most compelling point first, and support and back up your arguments. There are different kinds of leads for different types of pieces. You may want to debunk some commonly held belief with a surprising fact that opens the door to your argument or localize or humanize the piece with a brief anecdote that epitomizes a current situation or a new approach to addressing a problem. The lead may vary by topic or by the publication's style and readership, an upcoming event, and/or the data and information you have to work with.
- **Draw attention to what's new.** Publications are in the news business. Messages embedded in writing should underscore what the audience—even the experts—are missing, or is about to take place.

- **Be timely and topical.** By giving your opinion piece a topical slant or “hook,” your chances of seeing it published will increase.
- **Go against the grain.** By finding the unanticipated aspect of the storyline, identifying what flies in the face of contemporary wisdom, pieces will always seem timely and fresh.
- **Express a clear of view.** The piece should be original and shed new light on an issue from a distinct perspective.
- **Show the larger context.** Find ways of showing where your viewpoint fits in with the larger debate in the field and how it may advance the argument.
- **Appeal to common sense.** Consider lines of argument that indicate why elements of the D4AD agenda are almost inevitable given the current environment of high unemployment, the evolution of digital technology, and social distancing, and is a logical next step in addressing unemployment and recession. Similarly, draw attention to ways that D4AD's interface with workers is reducing the clutter of information and integrating key resources in ways that have been needed for a long time.
- **Use data wisely—and point out gaps and inequities.** Messages are particularly effective when they identify how some groups do not benefit, or are being left behind. Use numbers in ways to which people can relate—such as 3 in 10, or as ratios: one group is more than three times more likely to do something than others.
- **Discuss issues that people and your community care about.** This is sometimes called the “I” factor, because you remind people of their own stake in an issue and thus make it local or personal for them. For example, using technology in innovative ways to support and train workers during a time of social distancing and a major recession, or insightful advice that helps opinion leaders and policymakers address challenges they face, may resonate well.
- **Use colorful language.** It's not enough to make your point—you must make it stick in the minds of your readers. The piece should paint vivid pictures to get your point across and use real-life examples and analogies to demonstrate the issue you are discussing with the reader. For example, in painting a picture of our current workforce system, you might consider language that identifies the challenges workers face. “For low-income workers and unemployed workers, the process of finding good jobs shouldn't be a game of chance... Too often, information and services are not geared toward their needs and take them off track or seem part of a bewildering maze. Job leads take them on a merry-go-round of low-paying low-skill jobs that get them nowhere... It should not be such a slippery slope for any worker to gain solid footing to get ahead.”
- **Recoin clichés.** Consider reusing in a new way an age-old phrase or something that recently has been, or currently is being used, widely.
- **Make the ask.** Be direct and ask for what you want people to do. What are the three things that the audience or audiences can do to address the problem?
- **Stick the landing.** Use final messages that reinforce the point in the lead and return to the main theme.

Not all pieces will use all of these strategies, but as you work on a piece and review it—or review a potential piece a member of your team has drafted—it is useful to see if some of these strategies have been employed to help convey your message.

Potential Themes

To promote D4AD initiatives and elevate the work of D4AD grantees and partners, we have identified themes and lines of argument that can be easily developed into blog posts, commentaries, and op-eds. The themes are organized around various purposes—casemaking, launching the initiative, advocating for support, and other actions. Various themes will use the same lines of argument and evidence as others. The intent is to provide different angles into a consistent set of messaging.

Each theme needs to be adapted based on where it is placed, the target audience for each piece, and the author—in many cases, enlisting a trusted intermediary based on the audience will provide authenticity and the opportunity to include real-world examples that will bolster the argument. Themes also need to be adapted to focus on the locality, state, or workers which your D4AD initiative is serving (for consistency, the sample themes were written with a state focus).

THEME 1: Helping our state's most vulnerable workers

This piece would ideally start with a story of a worker who exemplifies the type of individual your D4AD initiative hopes to serve. This story would put a human face on the challenges low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed and underemployed, workers experience. The story will serve as a springboard to the remainder of the piece.

[Person's story] represents one of the many stories of the challenges that our state's most vulnerable workers face. Currently in our state, [XX] people are unemployed, [XX] are underemployed and [XX] make less than \$26,200 per year, the federal poverty level for a family of four. Many of these workers face the additional challenges of finding adequate healthcare and childcare, and of food insecurity and access to transportation and employment resources.

Given the historic economic challenges [our state] now faces, the immediate task at hand is to ensure that as many of our state's workers as possible are employed. But we need to do more than that. We know that as we go through economic downturns and recoveries, our workforce is changing and moving toward a more-skilled, better-trained and more-educated workforce than prior to the economic downturn. The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce reported that in the Great Recession of 2008, workers with only a high school degree or less lost 5.6 million jobs while those with a bachelor's degree or more gained nearly 200,000 jobs. Even more telling in the recovery that followed, those workers with some postsecondary education captured 11.5 million of the 11.6 million net new jobs created.

In this time of economic uncertainty robust workforce and education information systems with multiple access points, including effective online tools and resources, will be critical for workers not only to get back to work, but also to get on a more stable pathways to remunerable work.

We need to provide workers with insights on where skills gaps exist. Policymakers have often paid more attention to the mismatch between the skills workers have and the skills that new jobs demand. But workers need information about fields where openings exist and what training they require and then we need to help to close the skills gap. Providing workers with knowledge of where skills gaps exist only takes us so far. These efforts must be coupled with effective training and reskilling to help workers close that gap. In some cases, that may be a degree or a credential. In other cases, it may require short-term or on-the-job training. The key is to match the right training and reskilling with the opportunity to help workers move as quickly as possible into an available job, but at the same time position them to be able to advance in the future.

We also need to make it easier for workers to sort through the unholy mass of information that doesn't lead to better skills and higher paying careers, but a vicious circle of low-paying low-skill jobs that get them nowhere.

A new initiative, [name your initiative], is aiming to provide workers and jobseekers—particularly those who are low-income, lower-skilled, and unemployed or underemployed—with easy-to-access, current information to pathways to good jobs and to upgrade their skills and credentials. [Add more specifics about the initiative and its partners.]

[Name of initiative] is part of a national effort, the Data for the American Dream initiative, which takes a new approach to connecting workers and employers by making information relevant and easily accessible to those who often lack it.

Finding good work shouldn't be a game of chance. Readily available technologies allow us to match the skills and dispositions workers bring to the job more effectively to high-quality training opportunities as well as prospective employers and fields, helping workers to learn and make better decisions about jobs that are a good fit for them.



THEME 2: The benefits of upskilling our state's workforce

Amazingly, as this analysis by Vox points out, only a few short months ago we had a worker shortage. “At the end of January, the US economy had 7.6 million unfilled jobs, but only 6.5 million people were looking for work, according to data released Friday by the U.S. Department of Labor. This was the 11th straight month that the number of job openings was higher than the number of job seekers.” Obviously, our current reality is much different as unemployment rates have reached historic highs.

While the temptation is to focus on the short term, the current economic downturn doesn't change the reality of the job market in the knowledge economy and where the state needs to focus for the long term.

Our workforce needs to upskill because many low-skill jobs have disappeared and new ones that are emerging demand more education and training. Experts such as the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) have reported that “[w]hereas two out of three entry-level jobs in the industrial economy demanded a high school diploma or less, now two out of three jobs demand at least some education or training beyond high school.” Even in manufacturing, once considered the backbone of blue-collar jobs in this country, “workers with postsecondary education now outnumber workers with a high school diploma or less.”

That process started before the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerates during economic downturns and recoveries. During the Great Recession of 2008, workers with only a high school degree or less lost 5.6 million jobs while those with a bachelor's degree or more gained nearly 200,000 jobs, according to the researchers at Georgetown CEW. Even more telling, workers with some postsecondary education captured 11.5 million of the 11.6 million net new jobs created during the recovery.

Clearly if we are going to help our state get back to work, we are going to invest in the education, training and upskilling that is required to meet the needs of our changing economy. First and foremost, this is about helping workers find stable jobs and career pathways that can support them and their families over the long-term. But it is also good for our state.

A more skilled and educated workforce leads to greater worker productivity, a more competitive workforce, and increased wages. Employers are able to find the skilled workers they need and this in turn attracts more business and industry to our state, and ultimately raises our state's tax base and reduces the need for public assistance. Beyond economics, a more well-educated workforce also improves health and reduces crime and other social challenges. In short, a more skilled and educated workforce is a key to state prosperity.

We need to ensure that our education, training and workforce development services are connected, and that we have the best tools and resources and are able to help workers and jobseekers—particularly those who are low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed, and underemployed—identify and build the specific skills needed in today's high-growth fields, so they can move into locally available careers with family-sustaining wages.

To help our state strengthen and upskill our workforce, we have joined with the Data for the American Dream (D4AD) initiative, which helps states and communities connect millions of workers to meaningful jobs and career pathways. [provide details on your D4AD initiative].

THEME 3: The first step can take low-income workers a long way toward good jobs

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, [give order of magnitude such as millions/hundreds of thousands] of workers in [name state] are out of work, but even before this time—[give order of magnitude such as “tens/hundreds of thousands] of low-income, lower-skilled unemployed, and underemployed workers were trapped on a merry-go-round of short-term jobs that neither lead to expanding career opportunities nor pay enough to make ends meet.

Low-income and low-skilled workers, students, and jobseekers need clear and understandable educational and career pathways to find sustaining work. But if they cannot match their skills to the best jobs available and never have access to career pathways, they may never take the most important step—their first one.

[Name state initiative]—a partnership involving [identify types of or specific partners]—aims to remedy this problem. The initiative centralizes [name state]’s most powerful career, education and human services programs to help students and jobseekers take that first step toward economic success.

And for workers who have already taken their first or second or even third step, [name initiative] is there to support them on the pathway they have chosen (or help them decide on an alternative pathway).

[Name initiative] is designed to:

- centralize the most powerful career, education and human services programs and data and information tools;
- link digital tools with ongoing counseling and support from caseworkers who help workers navigate available public assistance, access continuous learning and skills development opportunities, and address individual (often personal) challenges;
- align and streamline services to be more cost-efficient;
- provide clearer options and pathways for students and jobseekers;
- serve business and industry by better matching jobseekers with the skills and knowledge employers need to available jobs.

[Add more information here about your initiative.]

Our goal is to help XXX,000 [nickname of people from your state] begin their journey by the end of 2020 to support the economic recovery and ensure that [name state] will fill the XX0,000 jobs that opened up each year before the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Add information about specific legislation or budget actions that can help the initiative serve more people.]

We urge voters and policymakers to spread the word to students and workers—particularly unemployed and underemployed workers—across the state and support funding for this crucial effort.

THEME 4: Job searching in a time of social distancing

In today's economic environment, low-income, low-skilled, low-wage, and unemployed workers face a double whammy. For one thing, we're in the midst of the highest unemployment since the Great Depression. Unprecedented numbers of workers are seeking services such as unemployment insurance and other social safety net programs. At the same time, the COVID-19 health crisis is demanding that we limit exposure to other individuals as much as possible and practice social distancing, making it hard to go to job centers to get counseling and training.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, at the peak of the great recession of 2008-09, more than 15 million people were unemployed and the percentage of workers unemployed long-term (27 weeks or more) hit unprecedented levels, representing nearly half of those unemployed. This put a tremendous strain on the nation's under resourced workforce system. Even during the height of the recession, when the federal government provided significant supplemental funding, the system struggled to serve workers in person. During that period, according to a study by the Urban Institute, federal employment services offered through the nearly 2,500 American Job Centers nationwide "served 22.4 million participants, of which only 14.2 million received staff-assisted services." The current economic downturn poses an even greater challenge for our workforce system.

[Tell story about how job centers are backed up and workers need personal connection and how your agency is using technology better.]

We've also launched a new initiative, Data for the American Dream, that provides our most vulnerable workers easy-to-access, just-in-time information to find pathways to good jobs and upgrade their skills and credentials. [Name state initiative]—a partnership involving [identify types of or specific partners]—centralizes [name state]'s most powerful career, education and human services programs to help students and jobseekers (or help them decide on an alternative pathway).

[Name initiative] is designed to:

- centralize the most powerful career, education and human services programs and data and information tools;
- link digital tools with ongoing counseling and support from caseworkers who help workers navigate available public assistance, continuous learning and skills development opportunities, and address individual (often personal) challenges;
- align and streamline services to be more cost-efficient;
- provide clearer options and pathways for students and jobseekers;
- serve business and industry by better matching jobseekers with the skills and knowledge employers need.

When you can't meet face to face, technology is, of course, more important than ever. It is a time when job centers have expanded virtual coaching and prep for job applications and conducting interviews.

Technology helps to speed up searching and provides access to online skill building resources and services that connect jobseekers to the job market (JobZone, Career Zone, helponebillion.com, Flexjobs.com, virtualvocations.com). But workers also need tools that are aligned to their own personal needs and involve them directly in the process. Many workers can't manage or sort out all these platforms but still need information that is timely, immediately useful, and backed with counseling and personal supports that help them find more solid, long-term footing in the job market.

THEME 5: Workers need trusted, reliable information

As unemployment numbers rise to historic levels, millions of Americans will be searching for employment opportunities or education and training programs that will lead to work. Unfortunately, as we have seen in past recessions, this is also a time when unscrupulous actors try to take advantage of individuals and families desperately seeking to secure a stable income quickly. These can range from illegal online scams promising easy money to legitimate businesses, or educational and training organizations overpromising the value of programs or certificates.

Workers—particularly unemployed and underemployed low-wage and lower-skilled workers—need access to trusted and reliable information about education, training and employment opportunities that can help individuals find a clear pathway forward. By centralizing and streamlining this important information for workers, new initiatives being developed as part of the Data for the American Dream project are helping America get back to work.



THEME 6: A sustainable recovery requires forward-thinking policies

For the past few months, [name state's labor department] has been stretched to capacity—assigning XX percent of staff to address the flood of people who signed up for unemployment insurance in the wake of layoffs, furloughs, and job closings. Now as the economy starts to open back up, we need not only to focus on providing short-term assistance but also long-term opportunities for the millions of low-income, lower-skilled, unemployed and underemployed workers to move into better jobs with more promising futures.

While some workers will certainly return to their previous positions once businesses are able to operate normally again, others will need access to education and training opportunities to upskill and find new careers, and many will seek to break the cycle of low-wage jobs. This will require increased support for our workforce systems which were already under-resourced prior to the current crisis. It will also require developing new tools and resources to help workers find the information they need to match their skills and aspirations to education and training opportunities and ultimately to prospective employers and fields with jobs that are the best fit for them and lead to careers that pay family-sustaining wages.

New efforts to develop robust resources to better serve workers—particularly those that are unemployed, underemployed, low-wage and lower-skilled workers—are being developed. One such effort is the Data for the American Dream (D4AD) initiative. D4AD supports innovative efforts to expand access to education and career information to help vulnerable workers and jobseekers land on their feet. D4AD helps states provide workers with easy-to-access, just-in-time information to find pathways to good jobs and upgrade their skills and credentials. D4AD helps:

- centralize the most powerful career, education, and human services programs and data and information tools;
- link digital tools with ongoing counseling and support from caseworkers who help workers navigate available public assistance, access continuous learning and skills development opportunities, and address individual (often personal) challenges;
- align and streamline services to be more cost-efficient;
- provide clearer options and pathways for students and jobseekers;
- serve business and industry by better matching jobseekers with the skills and knowledge employers need.

As we enter this recovery, we will need both financial support and strategic leadership to ensure that we not only get America back to work in the near-term, but also that we put our workers and our economy on a more solid, long-term footing. This will require forward-thinking policies that support strategic initiatives that strengthens our workforce systems.

THEME 7: Strengthening our community through sustainable careers

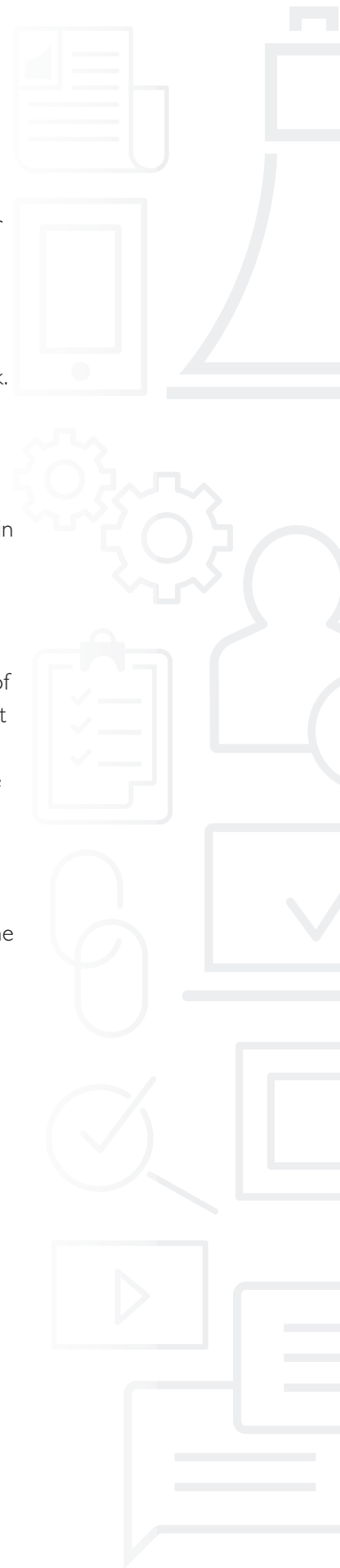
As [name state] digs itself out of the biggest unemployment hole in our history, members of our community have seen jobs furloughed, reduced, or lost forever, and have struggled to support their families and to get back on solid financial ground.

Public and private job centers in [name county] and across the state are there to help. They have always been able to provide lots of information about where to look and how to find work. But the path forward for individual workers varies by interest and skills, is not always clear, and sometimes the most obvious path is not the best choice. Sometimes we need help finding the right path, but even identifying the right person or tool to help us choose is not clear.

Recently, I was able to see a demonstration of a new resource to help workers and jobseekers, in particular those who are unemployed or caught in low-income, low-skill jobs, find better, family-sustaining jobs and career paths. It is called [name initiative].

[Name initiative], run by [agency], is aimed at providing you with easy-to-access, just-in-time information to find pathways to good jobs and upgrade their skills and credentials. It brings all of the state's resources and services together so you are not running from one agency to the next to get the information and support you need. It uses technology to help you identify and map your current skills against the skills needed for good, available jobs, and then maps out a course to get the education and training needed to attain those jobs [add more specifics about your tools and resources].

Our workers, our families and our community need more stable and sustainable careers so we are better equipped to deal with the economic ups and downs we have all experienced. Take the opportunity to check out [initiative]. It will help you find your path.



COMMENTARY PLANNING GRID

Concept and Title

(ensure your title speaks directly to your target audience)

Key Messages

(identify the core messages you want to get across)

Target Date for Publication

(list the general target date to see how the timing of all potential pieces relate)

Audience(s)

(list the audiences you are targeting for this piece—a long list may mean your piece is not targeted enough)

Goal/Purpose:

(list the desired actions you want the audience to take)

Outlet

(list potential outlets you are targeting for this piece)