**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

WorkAdvance offers industry specific, coordinated career pathways focused on advancement over time to achieve family-sustaining wages. Within one or more targeted industries, it aligns education and training with specific advancement opportunities in response to employer demand. Launched in 2011, WorkAdvance began as a national, randomized control study on sector-focused workforce development projects in New York, Oklahoma and Ohio.

In Northeast Ohio, WorkAdvance was coordinated by Towards Employment and supported by the Fund for Our Economic Future (the Fund) and other partners. The WorkAdvance demonstration project evaluated about 700 participants in Northeast Ohio and showed positive impact on earnings and advancement, and a positive return on investment for government, individuals, and society. These positive benefit-cost findings are not often seen in evaluations of employment and training programs.¹

Since the conclusion of the demonstration project, Towards Employment has been applying lessons learned to expand access to effective career pathway programming through the creation of supportive “on ramps,” with a specific focus on racial equity. The primary focus was to:

- Build new ways to better support those “not yet ready” to meet even the starting point for in-demand career pathways that offer family-sustaining wages
- Continue that support post-hire, seeking new ways to coordinate with employers around continued advancement.

**WorkAdvance worked, in several important ways.**

The WorkAdvance program design is measurably more effective than traditional workforce training. After five years, compared to traditional program counterparts, Northeast Ohio program participants were more likely to:

- Work regular shifts, full time, in a permanent job and/or in a job with opportunities for advancement, and were 1.5-3 times as likely to work in a targeted sector
- Earn $5,000 more annually, representing a 14-22% increase in wages
- Complete technical training (four times more likely than their traditional program counterparts)

Overall, the strongest impacts were experienced by those semi-attached to the labor market and the long-term unemployed, representing hope for those workers left behind and displaced by COVID.

Critical to participants’ success were advancement coaching, a focus on and resources to help with solving challenges in people’s lives that may interfere with work or living requirements, all offered with a duration of support of more than a year.

Since 2016, at the conclusion of the demonstration project, WorkAdvance has become embedded in our community in many ways, influencing program design across many organizations as well as influencing system-level changes to the way our Northeast Ohio communities connect with employers.

WorkAdvance now refers not just to the demonstration project, but rather to a comprehensive, coordinated approach to workforce development.

WorkAdvance taught us both about what works at the workforce program level, as well as what’s needed at the workforce system level to boost equitable access to and advancement in good jobs. Today, after five additional years of longitudinal research, innovations in service delivery, and increased presence of sector partnerships in Northeast Ohio — a
recommendation from the initial WorkAdvance project — we know a great deal more.

But challenges remain, and further comprehensive and coordinated work is required to address the following realities:

**The jobs with the highest wage growth also have high entry-level requirements.**

Workers who have not yet achieved math, literacy and digital literacy levels needed to enter in-demand pathways often require longer on ramps into (and sustained supports after) workforce training to reach and advance in living-wage careers. We now understand more about what is required — both programmatically and systemically — to effectively and equitably support workers so that they may overcome barriers to accessing good jobs and advancing in them.

**Coaching post-employment remains key.**

WorkAdvance taught us the importance of focusing on long-term goals and career advancement from Day One; this shapes all aspects of communication and service delivery. Ongoing and intensive, industry-informed coaching throughout the process is key to aligning the range of services workers need to attain economic mobility and helping individuals make informed and long-term choices about their careers. Yet a Brookings study found that “few workers” receive sustained support throughout their workforce development journey, with only 43% of sampled programs providing post-employment coaching and support to its participants beyond basic monitoring.²

**Understanding employers’ role in driving positive results was not a focus of the research and creates opportunity for more learning.**

Better understanding of availability of internal career pathways and earn-and-learn opportunities, management culture, scheduling and other job quality indicators may help drive more employer practice changes that align with equity goals.

**Even best-practice workforce programming and improved structures did not erase disparities in employment and earnings by race and gender.**

We are not just facing a skills gap, we are also facing an opportunity gap and systemic biases. Training people and connecting them with jobs is one piece of building a successful workforce. Improving job quality, equity and inclusivity for these jobs is just as critical.

**WorkAdvance provided insights on the need for an “on ramp” function as a key to driving equity.**

On ramps are the solution to helping individuals with barriers bridge opportunity gaps into family-sustaining careers. An “on ramp” is an enhanced program design that evolved from WorkAdvance. On ramps build on the same core elements — industry-specific coaching, holistic support services, technical training, industry partnership — and integrate additional supports to effectively help individuals with significant barriers to educational and economic success gain agency and traction, enabling advancement and stability over time.³ At a systems level, the on ramp function links employers and complex networks of service providers to coordinate systems of support, effectively navigating both the supply side and the demand side of the workforce system.
WorkAdvance worked in several important ways, but to maximize places where it fell short and meet our current moment, our ways of partnering, delivering services, and funding workforce development need further change.

**We recommend the following key action steps:**

**Build Up On Ramps**
Many workers need more and more intensive supports over a year or more to connect them with career pathways. Workforce programs can increase coaching, promote earn-and-learn opportunities that allow people to be paid while they upskill, and support access to flexible funds that help people address the social determinants of work beyond just the traditional transactional supports such as transportation and vouchers for childcare. Leveraging the on ramp function can continue these supports post-hire to maximize opportunities for career advancement for new hires and provide value to partner employers.

**Keep Eyes on Equity**
All ecosystem players, including employers, must make racial equity and job quality explicit goals in their workforce development work, committing to addressing the complex root causes of opportunity gaps.

**Make Work Better, Together**
Coordination across the workforce system can lead to the creation of new sector partnerships in high-growth industries with high numbers of workers of color, low pay, erratic schedules, limited benefits, etc., creating the opportunity to reimagine job design for improved job quality. A network of collaborating workforce system actors supporting the on ramp function would allow people to move through programming at a pace that addresses their needs.

For practitioners, policymakers, funders and employers, these learnings presents a path to advancing WorkAdvance and designing workforce programs that truly work for our community. Read on in this report to learn more, and scan the code for more context.
Of course you want to advance.

You want to go further. You can advance, and in this program you have these people who are advocating for you, who help you out and who actually want to see you succeed. Ask yourself what WorkAdvance can do for your life, now and later. Short-term goals, long-term goals, what’s best for you? And don’t be afraid to talk to someone, utilize your coaches, and be honest. What’s your fears? What’s standing in the way of making the best decision for you, in the long run?

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Two-time Towards Employment/University Hospitals Pathway Program (2016 and 2018)
Read more of Tiara’s story on pg. 24