

Bold Ideas for Transforming the Labor Market: WorkRise 2021 Request for Proposals

WorkRise, a research-to-action network for jobs, workers, and mobility that is hosted by the Urban Institute, supports research that advances the development of evidence-backed solutions for generating economic well-being and upward mobility for workers with low wages, particularly Black workers and other workers of color.

In 2021, we will invest up to **\$2.5 million in pilot initiatives and other research** to develop rigorous evidence that can inform and drive effective action toward a labor market that boosts workers' mobility. We are issuing a **Request for Proposals (RFP)** to identify research efforts that inform our understanding of how to best create pathways for enduring economic security beginning in the near term and create meaningful upward mobility in the longer term.

The RFP is open to all researchers, employers, worker advocates, practitioners, policymakers, and other organizations with compelling project ideas that will build credible knowledge that strengthens changemakers' ability to advance workers' interests and mobility. Please note that WorkRise cannot make grants to individuals.

The deadline to respond to the RFP is 11:59 pm EDT, June 27, 2021.

You are invited to attend an informational webinar on the RFP on **May 26, 2:00 pm EDT**. Register [here](#).

Background and Motivation

The United States has long been characterized by high levels of economic inequality coupled with low levels of mobility for those at the bottom of the economic ladder. These problems are compounded by the country's long history of systemic racism. Families with low incomes, especially families of color, were disproportionately impacted by the Great Recession and experienced few gains during the booming labor market of the past decade. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified these inequalities, and several indicators suggest that the health and economic well-being of workers in low-wage jobs and their families remain severely stressed, even as other sectors of the labor market show signs of recovery.

The policy response to the pandemic and recovery (e.g., the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act and American Rescue Plan) has unlocked substantial resources for state and local governments and partners to expand or pilot new approaches to support workers and their families. New direct income supports and other measures, along with new practices by businesses, service providers, and nonprofits, present unique opportunities to surface evidence and insight into policies and actions that could be sustained in support of an equitable recovery and stronger long-term labor market.

Genuine recovery requires more than a return to the recent past, where too many workers remained stuck in low-paying jobs living paycheck to paycheck despite a booming labor market. An inclusive recovery requires breaking down long-standing structural barriers and inequities and rebuilding the labor market into one that offers all workers meaningful opportunities for work with genuine dignity, economic well-being in the short-term, and upward mobility in the medium to long term. Building back from the economic damage created by the pandemic will involve a sustained period of experimentation

and adaptation. This creates an unprecedented opportunity to identify, assess, and implement reforms and innovations that achieve a more equitable and resilient labor market and boost upward mobility for all workers.

Request for Proposals

WorkRise seeks Letters of Inquiry (LOIs) for research projects that better define a *challenge* facing economically vulnerable workers and/or generate new evidence about potential *solutions*, meaning practices, policies, or programs that could increase the economic resilience and mobility of such workers.

Proposals should address critical issues in one of the following four areas. Although projects may address more than one of these areas, applicants will be asked to choose one area as a primary focus of their proposed project:

- 1. Macroeconomic forces and policy choices influencing the labor market.** Projects on this track consider how economic mobility is influenced by policy choices that shape labor markets (such as minimum-wage laws; workplace health and safety regulations; and tax, trade, and competition policies) and by macroeconomic forces (such as business cycles and fiscal or monetary responses, globalization, and technological change).
- 2. Employer practices and worker voice, representation, and power.** Example issues for this track include working conditions; workplace safety (including physical safety as well as workplace culture, harassment, etc.); flexibility and autonomy of work; how job tasks are defined; how wages are linked to employer practices; how schedules are set by employers; how benefits such as health insurance and paid leave determine overall compensation and thus shape longer-term earnings and income mobility; hiring practices; discrimination in hiring; noncompete clauses; and unionization and other channels for worker voice, representation, and power.
- 3. Skills, search, and job matching.** Examples include human capital, including both cognitive and noncognitive skills; how workers acquire human capital over a lifetime in both formal and informal settings; the landscape of skills and training institutions, including and private or nonprofit providers, degree-issuing institutions of higher education and credentialing programs; and the barriers to deploying skills in the labor market.
- 4. 360-perspective of work and workers and supportive services.** Projects on this track consider the range of factors outside the labor market that influence labor-market outcomes, including barriers and opportunities to mobility. Examples include individual-level factors (e.g., physical and mental health and well-being); family-level factors (e.g., family care relationships and responsibilities, family income and wealth); neighborhood-level factors (e.g., transportation, housing costs, safety, policing/criminalization); and social-cultural factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, geographic location, and immigration status).

WorkRise will award grants to projects deemed to have a high probability of producing **rigorous evidence** that informs key changemakers and helps shape policies, programs, or practices in their fields of inquiry. High-quality submissions will therefore include a strategy for communicating findings in

actionable terms to clearly defined stakeholders and explain how innovative ideas and solutions will advance in ways that would not be possible without investment from WorkRise.

WorkRise aims to build a grant portfolio that reflects a variety of **methodological approaches and data sources** (such as survey or administrative data; proprietary or publicly available data; and qualitative data from ethnography, focus groups, or case studies).

A portion of the WorkRise grant budget will be reserved for **pilot projects** and similar collaborations between researchers and businesses, nonprofits, advocates, governments, or other service providers that generate evidence on bold new program or policy innovations and improve our understanding of whether such innovations increase mobility (for which workers, under what conditions) and lay the groundwork for scaling successful ideas. See the appendix for additional details about WorkRise’s approach to pilots.

Projects that explicitly consider racial and ethnic inequities, gender disparities, geographic inequalities, and the role of systems or policies in perpetuating such inequities will receive particular interest. Projects that would create **new, longitudinal, open-source datasets** with the ability to disaggregate by key demographics (such as race, earnings, local labor market geography, industry or occupation, skills, education, gender, and family structure), and projects that consider the particular challenges faced by new labor-market entrants, also are strongly encouraged to apply.

Finally, WorkRise will consider the **diversity of project teams** across several dimensions, including organizational type, project team composition, geography, and stakeholders who will apply or consume the research results. Applicants are encouraged to assemble teams and partnerships that reflect these priorities. We encourage applications from historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities. We also encourage projects that cultivate a diverse pipeline of early-career scholars and practitioners.

Application Requirements

Interested parties should use [this link](#) to create an account on Urban Institute’s grants portal and submit a short form-based LOI that includes the following:

- A project title, key contact information, estimates of the project start and end date, and the total funding request from WorkRise.
- A selection of the applicant’s primary focus area (thematic track) and project type.
- A description of the key research question, approach data sources, and feasibility considerations.
- A brief theory of change behind your project idea that defines your project’s “end users” and how they will use the knowledge and outputs created by your project to advance workers’ interests better or faster than they could achieve without your work.
- A description of proposed project outputs (deliverables).
- A list of key project partners, including brief descriptions of their project roles.
- Key project team staff and relevant background information.
- Space for additional factors we should consider in assessing your idea.

Submission Deadlines and Decisionmaking Timeline

LOIs in response to the RFP are due by **11:59 pm EDT, June 27, 2021**. Before submitting an LOI, please review our [terms and conditions](#).

To submit an LOI, please access the [WorkRise grant portal](#). Please note you will need to create an account before you submit your LOI.

In late July, selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposals. Award decisions will be made on a rolling basis beginning in late September or early October. Award amounts are likely to range between \$25,000 and \$500,000 for a 12- to 18-month grant period.

For questions about the RFP process, please see the FAQ below. Please address additional questions to workrise@urban.org. **Questions about the RFP process and LOI form are due by 11:59 pm EDT, June 13, 2021**. The FAQ will be updated with additional information based on questions WorkRise receives from interested applicants by **June 18, 2021**.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who will see my application? LOIs will be evaluated by WorkRise’s internal research team as well as peer reviewers, including both researchers and practitioners with relevant expertise. WorkRise also anticipates creating a searchable “clearinghouse” that will be shared with [our funders](#) in order to provide the philanthropic community with the opportunity to invest in projects that fall outside of WorkRise’s current scope and/or are otherwise not well suited for a WorkRise grant.

How will my LOI be evaluated? A selection committee of experienced labor and mobility researchers including but not limited to the WorkRise research team, and, in some cases, practitioners with relevant expertise, will review submissions on a rolling basis. LOIs will be evaluated on a number of factors, including:

- relevance to RFP topics and goals;
- potential to advance knowledge for key stakeholders in ways that will lead to improvements in policies, programs, or practice;
- strength and feasibility of the proposed research design for generating credible and actionable evidence;
- credibility and diversity of the research team, including race, gender, career stage, and institutional home of principal investigators and other key project staff as well as partner organizations;
- consideration of racial, ethnic, gender, or geographic inequities or the role of systems or policies in perpetuating such inequities;
- value and accessibility of any data assets created to broader field; and
- cost of the proposed work relative to anticipated outputs and outcomes.

What deliverables and other requirements will WorkRise grants require? WorkRise invests in research that will support creating strong pathways for economic mobility for workers in low-wage jobs and industries. We aim to transform policy and practice through high-quality evidence and research. Grantees can be expected to produce original research and data products as well as one or two products that tailor insights for key stakeholder audiences, including employers, worker advocates, practitioners, policymakers, and the philanthropic community. These deliverables could include research reports or briefs, policy briefs, fact sheets, blog posts, data visualizations, infographics, or maps. WorkRise will work cooperatively with grantees to create a suite of products aimed at specific audiences.

Can I propose different deliverables in addition to WorkRise’s required deliverables (e.g., journal articles)? Yes

What kinds of activities will WorkRise not fund? We cannot fund propaganda, lobbying, and other attempts to influence legislation; voter registration drives and other attempts to influence the outcome of public elections; advocacy activities such as litigation; entities that promote or engage in criminal acts of violence, terrorism, hate crimes, the destruction of any state, or discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, religion, military and veteran status, disability, sex, age, or sexual orientation, or support of any entity that engages in these activities.

What kinds of “private nonprofit organizations” qualify to submit LOIs? Any kind, as long as the activities you are seeking funding for are for research or pilots that could advance understanding of how

to improve workers' economic security and mobility. Grant funds cannot be used for lobbying or for business activities (e.g., developing a product or service the organization intends to sell for a profit).

Do you support payments for graduate assistants? We're open to considering support for graduate assistants if they are part of the research team you are assembling. Please be sure to include as much information as possible about these cost items in your rough budget estimate to help us understand how proposed grant funds will be used.

Do research projects and pilot evaluations need to focus on the United States? Yes. WorkRise is only accepting submissions for research projects and pilots of interventions in the United States. We are open to reviewing research projects that take a comparative approach by drawing lessons from other countries, but your submission should directly make the case for how lessons will be applied in the US context.

Do all organizations have to be based in the United States? All organizations must be based in the United States or its territories.

My proposed idea cuts across multiple thematic areas. Which one should I choose? Choose the one you think best fits and most drives your work and the audience that will most actively consume and use your research. We highly encourage cross-cutting work but grouping projects into major categories helps reviewers weigh the merits of a proposal against other projects with similar goals and contributions to particular fields.

What outcomes are of most interest to you? The RFP is open-ended to encourage responses from a variety of fields related to workers and economic mobility. In your submission, please make the case for how the outcomes you seek to measure relate to workers' economic security and mobility.

Are you only funding evaluations, or is the RFP open to related research questions? We are funding evaluations, pilots, and both foundational and applied research projects.

Does the proposal have to be about work and workers? We welcome submissions that address how other systems (e.g., criminal justice or health care) interact with labor-market outcomes, but all proposals should ultimately tie back to and explicitly address economic security and mobility for workers or people seeking work.

Do you support dissemination and engagement activities? Yes, and we encourage efforts to ensure findings are communicated to key audiences with maximum impact. But please note we cannot fund lobbying or litigation activities. Please describe in as much detail as possible the kinds of dissemination and engagement activities you envision and how grant funds will be allocated across supporting activities in the relevant sections of the LOI form.

"Mobility" is an outcome that usually takes longer than 12-18 months. How should we think about mobility in our proposed measures and outcomes? We know mobility is a long-term outcome and that outcomes such as wage gains might take longer than one year to materialize. We have deliberately left these terms open in order to generate a full range of responses from innovators and researchers with a variety of perspectives. Respondents should include their own definitions and an explanation for why they have chosen their definitions.

My idea doesn't specifically target vulnerable workers. Can I still apply? Yes, but please include in your research design whether and how you will study the intervention's impact on vulnerable groups.

Will WorkRise fund projects longer than 18 months? We can fund projects slightly longer than 18 months, but please explain the need for a longer period in your submission (e.g., a planned pilot does not officially start until a few months into the grant period).

When should projects start? Our aim is for projects to start as quickly as possible, launching in late fall 2021. But we understand implementing projects takes time and coordination and will consider projects with start dates as late as the first quarter of 2022.

How do you define your terms? For example: “economic security,” “economic mobility,” “vulnerable workers”? We have deliberately left these terms open in order to generate a full range of responses from innovators and researchers with a variety of perspectives. Respondents should include their own definitions and an explanation for why they have chosen their definitions.

What is the deadline to submit an LOI in response to the RFP? The deadline to submit an LOI is 11:59 pm ET, June 27, 2021.

Who should I contact if I want to learn more about WorkRise? Please email questions to workrise@urban.org.

What is your indirect cost rate policy? We’re assessing proposed indirect costs on a case-by-case basis because we expect a wide variety of organizations to apply to the RFP.

Can I submit more than one LOI? Yes, as long as each LOI describes distinct projects and research questions. Please note that it is unlikely that WorkRise will fund more than one grant per organization.

What are the expected award amounts? Awards amounts are anticipated to range between \$25,000 to \$500,000 for a 12- to 18-month grant period. A total of \$2.5 million will be awarded.

Are there preferred award amounts? Will smaller/larger proposed budgets be penalized? We expect to award grants of varying amounts and aren’t giving preference to awards of any particular amount. That said, our aim is to make many investments to advance knowledge on worker economic security and mobility, so it is unlikely that we will award more than one or two very large (e.g., \$500,000) grants. Your proposed budget should match the project and the expected value of research findings contributed to the field.

Who is eligible to submit an LOI? Eligible applicant organizations include academic institutions; public entities; private nonprofit organizations; state and local government agencies; and for-profit organizations. All organizations must be based in the United States or its territories. Applicants also may represent partnerships between service providers or practitioners and researchers. *We request that only one lead partner fill out the LOI form on behalf of the partnership and indicate partnering organizations in the relevant field.*

We strongly encourage applications that include researchers who are from groups that are underrepresented in policy research and/or who are affiliated with institutions that serve underrepresented groups, such as historically Black colleges and universities; academic institutions serving primarily Latinx students, such as the Hispanic Serving Institutions; tribal colleges; and other similar institutions.

As a researcher, do I have to be affiliated with an organization in order to submit an RFP? In general, we prefer applicants be affiliated with an organization to ease the grantmaking process, but we will assess individual applicants on a case-by-case basis.

My research project is partly funded. Can I still submit an LOI? Yes.

I run a program. Can I submit an LOI in partnership with a researcher? Yes.

Does my research project have to have a specific geographic focus? Can it be federally focused? We are open to projects at a variety of geographic levels so long as researchers can make a compelling case for why they have chosen the appropriate geographic unit of analysis for their question. Hyper-local projects will need to demonstrate the potential for scale. Projects looking at national-level interventions will need to address the potential for geographic diversity in outcomes or mechanisms.

Are grant funds available to support programs or operations? Yes, but projects must include a research, data collection, and/or evaluation component as well. Projects must also produce at least one public-facing deliverable.

I conduct research in partnership with community members, can funds be used to pay stipends to my community partners? Yes.

Can research proposals consider multiple units of analysis (i.e., individual-level, institution-level, community-level)? Yes. We are most interested in economic security and mobility outcomes as they relate to the individual or the family or household unit, but we welcome projects that address the multilevel systems that individuals and families are nested within.

When will I know whether I have been invited to submit a full proposal? In late July, selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposals. Award decisions will be made on a rolling basis beginning in late September or early October. Award amounts are anticipated to range between \$50,000 to \$500,000 for a 12- to 18-month grant period.

What will the full proposal process look like? Selected LOIs will be asked to submit additional information about their research proposal, methodology, research team, budget, and other items and will answer specific questions from reviewers about their proposed approach.

Who do I contact if I'm having technical difficulties or questions about the LOI? Please email questions to workrise@urban.org no later than 11:59pm ET, June 12. Please write "WorkRise LOI" in the subject line of your email.

We will attempt to resolve technical issues as quickly as possible. This FAQ will be updated with answers to questions submitted on Friday, June 18.

ABOUT WORKRISE'S FUNDING

WorkRise founding funders are the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Mastercard Impact Fund in collaboration with the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth. We receive funding support from several other corporate and family foundations. WorkRise's list of funders can be viewed on our website: <https://www.workrisenetwork.org/about-workrise#funders>. We are grateful to them and to all of our funders, who make it possible for WorkRise to advance its mission. Funders do not determine research

findings or the insights and recommendations of WorkRise experts. Further information on funding principles of the Urban Institute, WorkRise's parent organization, is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

Appendix: WorkRise’s Approach to Pilots

Why we fund pilots

Pilot studies are a key component of WorkRise’s research investment portfolio because they present a unique opportunity to generate new evidence on applied interventions designed to enhance mobility for those who have been shut out. Pilots are “real-world” interventions, including both public policies (e.g., a phased introduction of new workplace regulatory policies), employer practices (e.g., scheduling practices, skills-based hiring interventions), and programs (e.g., emergency aid, training programs, wrap-around supports).

WorkRise’s conceptualization includes both feasibility studies (e.g. small-scale pilots designed to determine whether a larger pilot of an intervention can or should be pursued, to establish proof of concept, and to develop principles for the effective design and implementation of a larger pilot), as well as fully developed, larger-scale pilots designed to identify specific quantitative or qualitative outcomes.

WorkRise’s key interest in any pilot investment is the generation of high-quality, rigorous evidence on the efficacy of a given intervention in the context of economic security and mobility for low-wage workers, especially Black workers and other workers of color. As such, we generally provide support for the research component of the pilot (rather than the implementation) and work with grantees to ensure that the pilot has sufficient outside funds for implementation.

WorkRise pilot criteria

WorkRise will consider pilots that meet the following four criteria:

1. Include a partnership between a research team and one or more practitioners, employers, workers’ advocates, and/or policymakers.
2. Generate high-quality, systematic new data and evidence on program or policy innovations.
3. Have the potential to improve our understanding of how well such innovations increase mobility for various populations.
4. Lay the groundwork for scaling successful ideas.

Criteria details

1. **Pilots must include a partnership between a research team and one or more practitioners, employers, or policymakers.** Pilot projects must include a “real-life” intervention *and* a research team who work in partnership to design and evaluate the intervention. The research team can be housed inside the institution hosting the intervention (e.g. a nonprofit with an in-house research arm and a policy or practice arm) or at an outside institution (e.g. a university or a think tank). The institution implementing the intervention could include one or more employers, service providers (nonprofit or for profit), unions or worker centers, advocacy organization, or government agency (local, state, or federal).
2. **Pilots must generate new data on program or policy innovations. Pilots must be designed and implemented in a way that allows for the collection of rigorous new data allowing for measuring the success of the program or policy innovation.** Although WorkRise is open to descriptive, noncausal analysis (including qualitative data such as case studies and ethnography), projects that include methods allowing for strong causal inference (e.g.,

randomized controlled trials) will be received with particular interest.

- 3. Pilots must have the potential to improve our understanding of how well the tested innovations increase mobility, including identifying for which workers and under which conditions.** WorkRise recognizes that the pathways to economic security and economic mobility are varied and not always direct, but any pilot receiving support from WorkRise must make a theoretically plausible case for the relationships between the tested intervention and economic mobility–related outcomes. Further, WorkRise pilot investments will disaggregate findings across different characteristics of workers (especially race, but also age and gender) and illuminate whether and how interventions operate differently for different groups.
- 4. Pilots must lay the groundwork for scaling successful ideas.** WorkRise will support pilots that have the potential to scale beyond the scope of the initial intervention and that are able to articulate a clear vision for how a successful intervention might be brought to a larger population. Pilot projects that are designed to generate generalizable evidence, such as by identifying mechanisms or otherwise taking approaches that can build evidence on not just whether programs work but also why, will be received with particular interest. Note that “scale” does not necessarily require an intervention that works for all people in all places: a project “at scale” may still serve a relatively targeted population (e.g., young workers, workers of color, etc.).