HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY LEARNING LAB

LESSONS LEARNED & IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

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LEARNING LAB TOOLKIT

This toolkit is designed to provide guidance for workforce boards seeking to implement a successful High School Equivalency (HSE) support program. The target population for this program is individuals aged 16 to 24 years who have not achieved success in traditional academic environments. Prerequisites for implementation include access to appropriate curriculums, a staffing structure that supports service delivery, and a system to report outcomes. The average cost of the program is $2,000 per client, with some clients requiring a higher investment of time and resources and others requiring less.

WHY EXPAND HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY (HSE) PROGRAMS?

Expanding HSE programs for youth age 16-24 averts a deeper fall

There is often a gap between the volume of young adults who need High School Equivalency (HSE) coaching and employment support and the capacity of community programs to meet the full needs of this population. Geography may play a role in being able to provide these services. Individuals in need of these support services may not have access to a physical workforce or training center. In addition, there are often factors outside of academics that hamper success in more traditional environments.

Partnering with school districts and the community provides access to post-graduation employment and training opportunities

To expand their capabilities to meet HSE needs in the community, Workforce Boulder County (WfBC) began looking for options to broaden their reach in providing these services. Their solution was to create a Learning Lab to provide enhanced coaching, mentoring, and support services. In addition to academic, emotional, and physical concerns, WfBC identified a need for improved financial literacy training for this population. Thus, financial literacy education was added to the program. WfBC went beyond providing HSE testing support to identify additional services that would strengthen youth through the completion of the program into employment and beyond.

WHY SHOULD WORKFORCE CENTERS EXPAND HSE OFFERINGS?

Ensuring that youth are properly equipped with the education and skills necessary to successfully navigate employment assists them in continuing on a path to employment or postsecondary education. This reduces the likelihood of needing future social support services. Workforce centers have the partnerships and community connections to provide the educational and social support needed and to provide assistance in transitioning into employment.

WHY SHOULD SCHOOL DISTRICTS EXPAND HSE OFFERINGS?

Not all students are able to thrive in traditional academic environments. Partnering with the local workforce board to support individuals through HSE programs allows school districts to leverage the extensive resources of the workforce centers to ensure that youth in HSE programs have an expanded foundation for success.

In 2018, the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) released a total of $350,000 in grants to Colorado's local workforce areas for support in scaling a promising practice or testing a new model of service delivery that maximizes efficiency in serving customers. This funding contributed to the expansion of the **Learning Lab**.

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EXAMPLE: LEARNING LAB

The Learning Lab provided through WfBC offered prevention-focused and community-centric education and employment opportunities for young adults in the community. This was accomplished through a highly tailored system that developed trust with clients and connected clients with multiple support services based on their individual needs. In addition to offering a variety of curriculums for HSE tutoring and testing support, the learning lab model also provided financial literacy coaching, mentorship opportunities, and executive functioning coaching. Initially, these services were provided in a combination of in-person and online interactions. With the onset of COVID closures and restrictions, the program was moved to a fully virtual format. Through the transition to online delivery, focus remained on building high-quality, trusted relationships with clients. This has been the key element in delivering a successful program.

BENEFITS OF LEARNING LAB MODEL

FINANCIAL LITERACY EDUCATION
Financial literacy education is provided as part of the program to better prepare and support clients as they transition from HSE acquisition to employment.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES
Of the 60 clients who completed their HSE utilizing the learning lab model, 55 received honors or high honors scores, 39 entered employment, and 22 initiated postsecondary education.

SUPPORTIVE NETWORK
Clients have access to a variety of social services through workforce center partners to ensure that the whole client is being served.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING COACHING
Executive functioning coaching assists young adults in regulating their emotions, understanding thoughts and actions, managing time, acquiring and maintaining focus, and initiating tasks to increase measurable skills.

MENTORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES
Adult mentorship provides opportunities to build relationships, maintain accountability, and provide guidance at a pivotal time in client's lives.

IMPROVED ACCESS
The online format ensures that clients living in remote areas or with transportation limitations have access to high quality coaching and support services.

LEARNING LAB TIMELINE

	MONTH 1	MONTH 2	MONTH 3	MONTH 4	MONTH 5	MONTH 6
SELECT CURRICULUMS	� progress	▬				
SECURE FUNDING	▬	▬				
BUILD COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS	▬	▬	▬			
IDENTIFY PARTICIPANTS			▬			
BUILD TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS			▬	▬	▬	▬
EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING						▬
KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIS)						▬

This is a repeating loop of activities as new clients are added on a rolling basis

WHAT AN IT CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAM IS NOT

- **It is NOT a one-size-fits-all solution.** The learning lab model customizes content and service delivery to the unique needs of clients.

- **It is NOT a replacement for one-on-one interactions.** The online format provides increased access, but it is the relationships between coaches and clients that is a critical success factor.
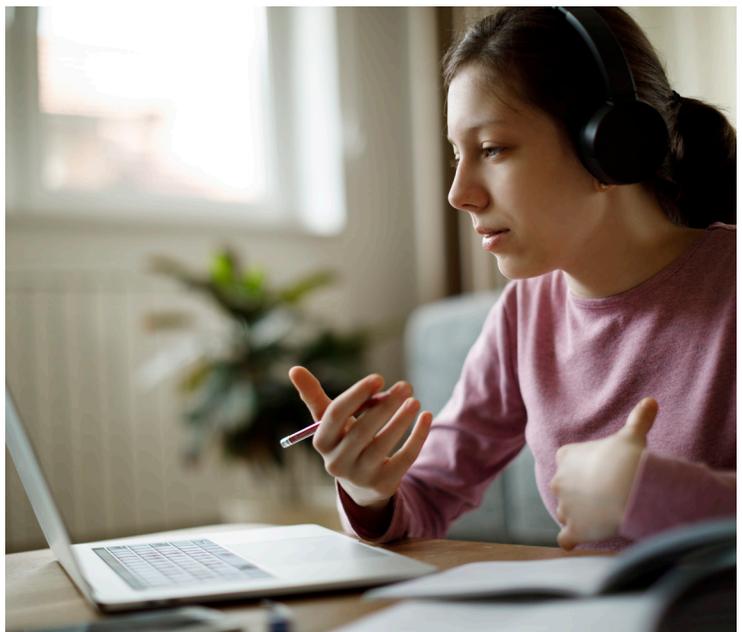
SELECT CURRICULUMS

One of the hallmarks of learning lab programs is that they are self-paced and supported by coaches. Selected curriculums need to offer the flexibility to accommodate a variety of learners. When deciding on a format for instruction, consider what will be needed to support the delivery of instruction. For brick-and-mortar programs, ensure that the physical location is accessible to clients and is equipped with textbooks, calculators, and other necessary supplies. For hybrid or fully online programs, ensure that clients will have adequate access to the internet and other supporting technologies. Decide what additional elements would add value to the program. For example, the Learning Lab implemented by WfBC included financial literacy education and mentoring services. Understand the funding available and the impact that licensing and other curriculum costs may have on the ability to meet community demand.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Owner(s):
Internal Project Lead

Timeline:
Varies depending on current curriculum holdings

Key Questions for Workforce Boards to Ask:

- Are existing curriculums sufficient to meet the needs of clients? Are those curriculums successful?
- Is there additional content that would be beneficial?
- Do clients have sufficient access to the materials and instruction?

SECURE FUNDING

Securing sources of sustainable funding will likely be one of the greatest challenges to operating a learning lab model. Funders often put restrictions around who is eligible to benefit. If not carefully managed, this can severely limit the accessibility of these services to those who would benefit. When approaching potential funders, package a compelling story and look beyond federal funding dedicated to adult basic education for these programs.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Owner(s):
Workforce Center Director, Internal Project Lead

Timeline:
Varies depending on strength of current funding sources in relation to need

Key Questions for Workforce Boards to Ask:

- Which funding sources will allow for the greatest level of participation?
- Will the funding source be sustainable?

BUILD COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Community partnerships are critical to ensuring that clients can access comprehensive wrap-around services as they complete the program and seek employment. Identify partner organizations that offer services across the continuum of services in highest demand by the clients and ensure that the appropriate agreements are in place. Written contracts and letters of commitment help to ensure that expectations are clear regarding communications and participant progress. Examples of community partners include: school districts, safety net agencies, public housing agencies, community justice services, human services organizations, and non-profit organizations. A learning lab model serves youth who often have complex needs and a network of community partners offers coordinated support.
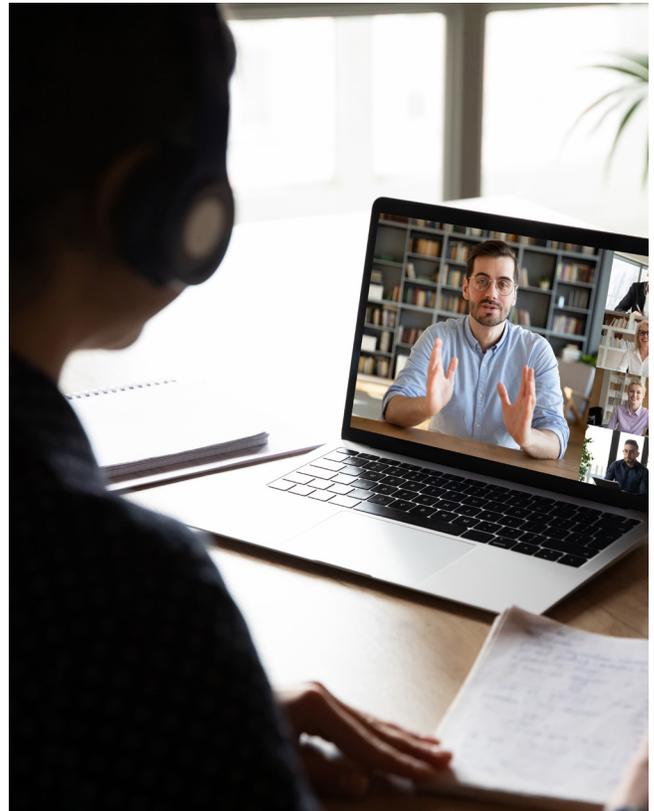
KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Owner(s):
Project Lead

Timeline:
Varies depending on the nature of existing relationships and the level of modifications required

Key Questions for Workforce Boards to Ask:

• Which services are in greatest demand by the target population? What are the gaps and how can the gaps be addressed?

• Do existing partnerships require modification to accommodate program participants?

• How will information related to clients be shared? What information will be shared?

PARTICIPANTS

IDENTIFY PARTICIPANTS

Participants can be referred from a variety of sources. These include judicial channels, school districts, youth shelters, and other social service agencies. It is important to clarify with these partner agencies the qualification criteria for program participation.

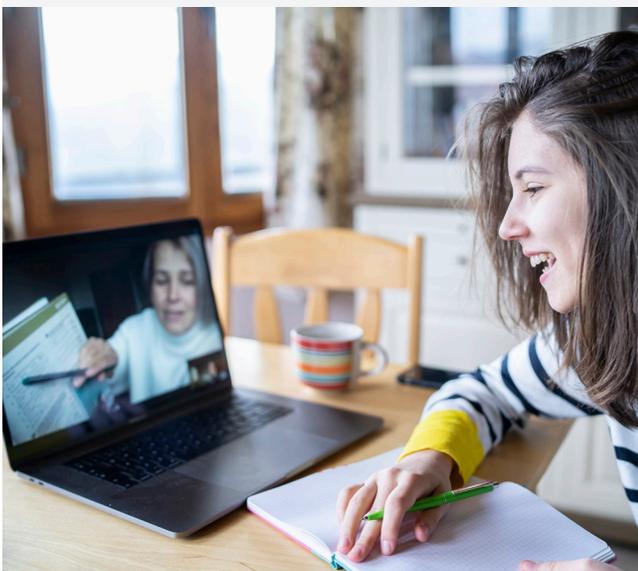### KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Owner(s):
Internal Program Lead, Community Partners

Timeline:
Ongoing

Key Questions for Workforce Boards to Ask:

- What will be the primary referral sources for participants?

- How can existing partnerships be leveraged to identify appropriate candidates?

- Are there funding restrictions on who can participate?

BUILD TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS

Trusted relationships are critical to the success of the program. The relationships between coaches and clients allow for candid communication around needs, expectations, and fears. These relationships also provide a sense of accountability and personal investment in the welfare of the clients. The ideal coaching ratio is one adult education specialist for every 40 clients. Coaches should have the ability to listen, employ empathy, and address the underlying fears or issues that have hampered success in traditional academic settings. It is important to meet clients where they are and work to help them advance. Parents, guardians, and case managers may also be included, when appropriate. When support personnel are brought in, set clear expectations around what can and cannot be shared regarding the client.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Owner(s):
Internal Project Lead, Coaches

Timeline:
Ongoing

Key Questions for Workforce Boards to Ask:

- How will families and support systems be integrated? What protocols will be put into place to honor participant confidentiality?

- What actions will be taken to develop trusted relationships with participants?

- What are key characteristics that coaches should demonstrate to facilitate this process?

- What resources or training should be provided to support coaches?

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

Upon completion of HSE requirements, clients are provided a warm hand-off to workforce center programs focused on employment. This provides a continuity of service, allowing clients to build off their recent success and either secure employment or continue their education journey. Whether this is a formal or an informal hand-off process, it is important to ensure that clients are connected to employment programs upon HSE completion.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Owner(s):
Internal Project Lead, Workforce Center Program Partners

Timeline:
Ongoing

Key Questions for Workforce Boards to Ask:

- Will there be a formal or informal transition to employment services upon completion of HSE requirements?

- What employment supports are needed after completion?

- How can interested clients receive an introduction to higher education offerings?

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIS)

When implementing any program, it is important to measure progress toward goals. Start with identifying the key problems or questions that the program is intended to address, then identify the metrics that best track progress toward accomplishing each one. For a learning lab model, important metrics include HSE completion rate of participants and employment or enrollment in higher education within one year of completion. Other metrics may be added, depending on local emphasis and goals. Decide who is responsible for reports, the frequency and format of reports, and who should receive the reports.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Owner(s):
Internal Project Lead

Timeline:
Dependent on frequency of reporting and how long clients are followed after HSE completion

Key Questions for Workforce Boards to Ask:

- How long will clients be tracked after completion?

- What is the primary goal of implementing this program?

- What metrics best track progress toward this goal?

- Who is responsible for collecting and reporting metrics?

- What is the frequency, format, and distribution of reports? Will they be made publicly available?
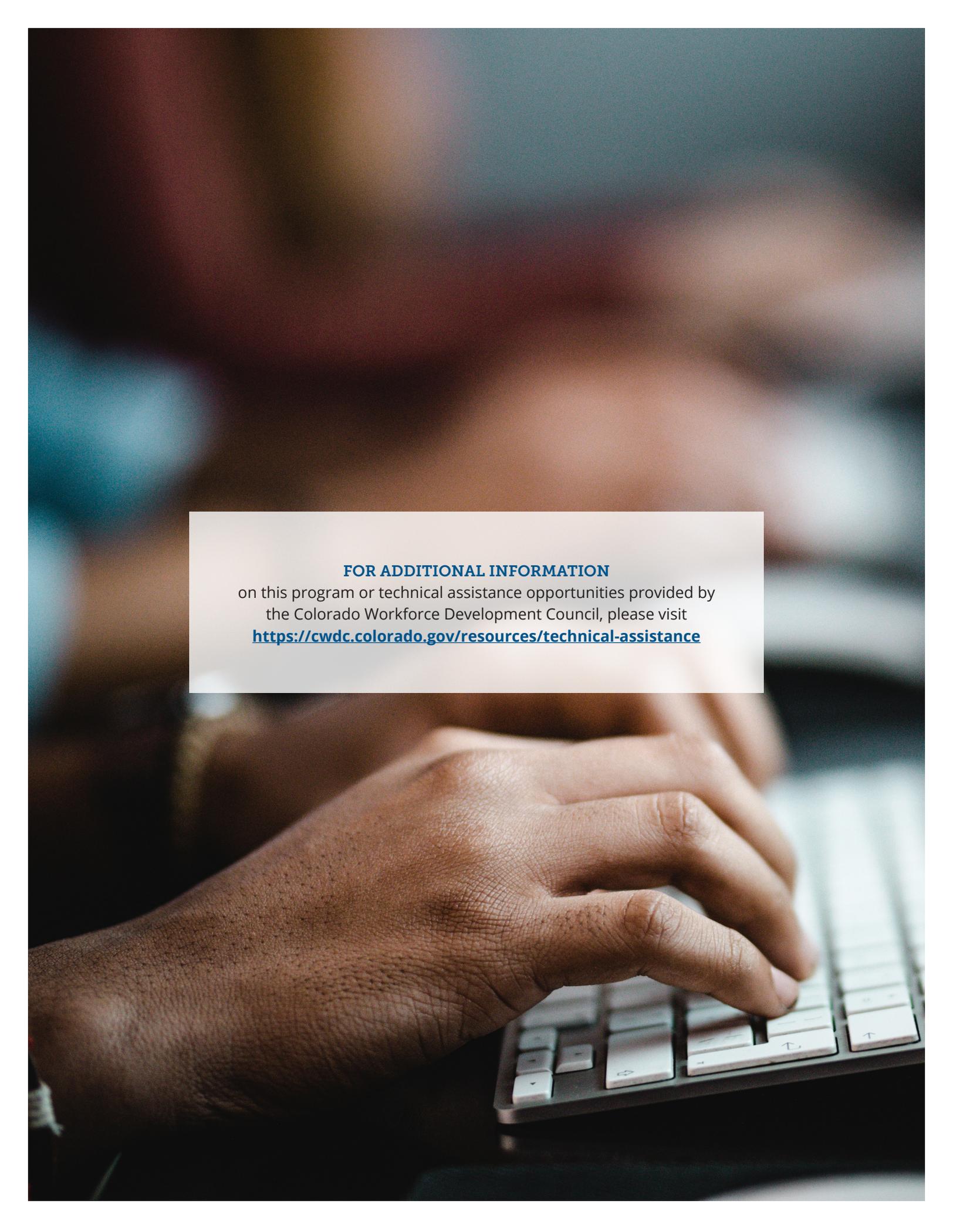
FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
on this program or technical assistance opportunities provided by
the Colorado Workforce Development Council, please visit
https://cwdc.colorado.gov/resources/technical-assistance

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Colorado Workforce
Development Council