



**Jobs for
the Future**

From Farmwork to Opportunity

**How Two Central Valley Organizations Pair Financial
Supports With Trusted Guidance**

AUTHORS

Rene Velazquez
Senior Manager, JFF

Tara Smith,
Director, JFF

Acknowledgments

This report and associated technical assistance and developmental evaluation provided to the Farmworkers Advancement Program (FAP) for Program Year 2024-2025 were funded by a grant award totaling \$1,000,000 (100%) from the U.S. Department of Labor, with \$0 (0%) financed from nonfederal sources.

We want to thank staff at the Central Valley Opportunity Center and Kern County's Employers' Training Resource department for sharing their time, insights, and expertise to inform this case study.

About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. www.jff.org.

Contents

Introduction	3
Designing for the Realities of Farmworker Advancement	4
ETR: Paid work that opens doors	5
CVOC: Pairing training with financial support	5
Putting the Model Into Practice	7
Navigating system constraints to identify allowable expenses	7
Braiding public and nonpublic funding to expand services	8
Key Takeaways	9

01. Introduction

For one former Kern County farmworker, receiving a voucher for work shoes became more than simply help with a job-related expense. Wearing those shoes at work helped her feel that she belonged in a new environment that had once seemed out of reach. “My self-esteem has completely changed thanks to [this program]. I now have a job with benefits that will give me retirement, and there are more opportunities and ways to move up. This is where I belong,” she said. That example captures a central lesson from the [California Farmworkers Advancement Program \(FAP\)](#): The pathway to economic mobility is built not only through training and job placement but also through the financial supports and trusted relationships that make participation possible.



Both the [Central Valley Opportunity Center \(CVOC\)](#) and the Kern, Inyo, and Mono Counties Consortium Workforce Development Area-[Kern County Employers' Training Resource \(ETR\)](#) are supported by the FAP, a first-of-its-kind population-specific investment launched by the state's Employment Development Department to support economic mobility for farmworkers and their families. CVOC and ETR have decades of experience serving farmworkers in the Central Valley region and know how critically important financial supports and trusted relationships are in helping FAP participants successfully transition from farmwork into new careers.

To date, 20 FAP awardees, including community-based organizations, workforce development boards, and educational institutions, have received a total of approximately \$25 million in governor's discretionary funds under the federal [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#). Jobs for the Future supports FAP operators as the technical assistance and developmental evaluation provider, helping organizations implement effective programs and share strategies with peers across California.

02. Designing for the Realities of Farmworker Advancement

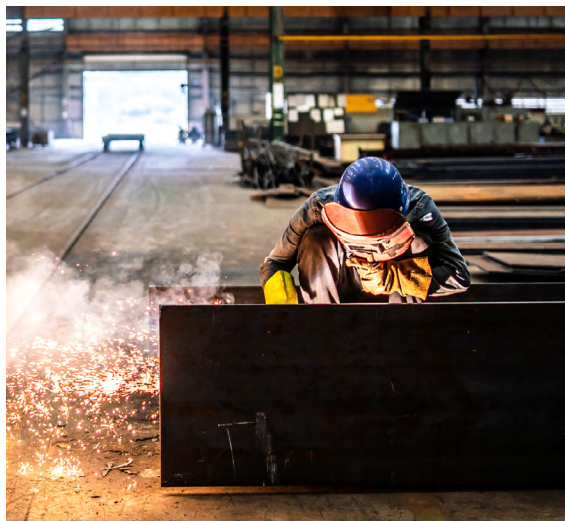
CVOC and ETR have both built their FAP initiatives on the same premise: Workforce programs must meet farmworkers where they are—economically, geographically, linguistically, and personally—and help them take a credible next step. Their work centers on relationship-driven strategies, such as community engagement and individual case management, to build trust with farmworkers. They also work to remove barriers to new career pathways by providing farmworkers with financial supports, such as paid work experiences, stipends, milestone incentives, and vouchers for clothing, tools, and transportation.

CVOC is a community-based nonprofit organization that has been serving farmworkers and people from low-income households across Madera, Merced, and Stanislaus counties—which are part of the northern section of California’s larger Central Valley region—since 1979. The CVOC FAP combines individualized assessment and coaching, occupational training, hands-on learning, English language learning, GED preparation, basic skills training, and other assistance.

Operating further south, ETR is a department of Kern County that also acts as the administrative arm for the local workforce board serving Kern, Inyo, and Mono counties. ETR partners closely with the America’s Job Center in Bakersfield, California, connecting participants with additional supports available through other colocated workforce and social services programs. The ETR FAP begins with a career interest assessment and then connects participants with short-term paid work experiences, on-the-job training, job development, and follow-up support.

Together, these FAPs demonstrate that financial support is not an add-on to the training and employment pathway; it is what makes the pathway viable for farmworkers and their dependents.

ETR: Paid work that opens doors



Through its decades of experience in the Central Valley, ETR recognized that a primary barrier for many farmworkers hoping to change careers is the fact that they cannot afford to miss work and go without a paycheck while pursuing occupational training. Therefore, a central strategy of the ETR FAP is paid work experience linked to strong employer engagement and follow-on job development. Participants typically complete approximately 300 hours of paid work experience, which gives them an opportunity to explore a new occupation, learn workplace norms, and demonstrate skills that may not be visible on a resume. ETR uses FAP funds to

support this paid work at the employer's prevailing wage for the position. This structure gives participants greater flexibility to explore a new occupation and build experience while continuing to afford household expenses. The work experience can extend into approximately 480 hours of on-the-job training, with employer cost-sharing of up to 50% of wages that is designed to create a gradual transition from subsidized participation to unsubsidized employment.

Many of ETR's paid work experience placements are with partner public agencies that provide a range of stable, well-paying job opportunities. For instance, ETR's partnership with Kern High School District makes paid work experience feasible for both employers and FAP participants. With the school district serving as the employer of record, employers can train and assess a worker without taking on the full administrative burden of a new employee. Meanwhile, participants gain paid experience in a job they have identified as a career goal, such as child care, food service, custodial and maintenance, and clerical/office positions. ETR staff members collaborate with participants to develop a comprehensive plan of action, enabling farmworkers to define for themselves what a "good job" is; typically, they describe year-round stability, indoor work, benefits, a manageable schedule, and a chance to move forward without the seasonal and physical demands associated with fieldwork. Paid work experience is valuable, even when it does not result in immediate post-program employment: Participants leave with a recent reference, an expanded resume, and a new employer connection. For many, it is their first work experience outside of farmwork and helps build their confidence in pursuing a new career.

CVOC: Pairing training with financial support

CVOC's approach places persistence support at the center of its FAP initiative. Participants receive occupational training in high-demand fields, such as welding, forklift operation, trucking, food services, and clerical services. In addition to providing training, CVOC offers a financial support strategy that is individualized to remove participation barriers. It provides transportation support, including covering the

cost of vehicle registration and gas cards, rental and utility assistance, child care vouchers, professional clothing and tools, and more. These supports help participants manage the immediate cost of participation while they work toward longer-term goals.

The organization also provides daily training stipends of \$15, which are intended to help participants afford breakfast and lunch through CVOC's culinary program cafeteria. CVOC considers its training location to be in a food desert, and it found that participants would sometimes miss class or have trouble concentrating because they did not have enough food to eat during the day. The daily stipend helps program participants remain in class, focus better, and participate in training. The stipend also ensures that there are plenty of customers for the cafeteria, which helps prepare culinary program participants for the pressures of a school or commercial kitchen.

CVOC's approach has evolved over time and informed its current FAP initiative's design. In 2021, the organization piloted participant incentives using American Rescue Plan Act funding and saw promising results before the funding ended. Today, CVOC braids multiple funding sources to support participants: Community Services Block Grant funds provide stipends during training for participants who are not receiving unemployment benefits, while FAP funds support a one-time payment when participants secure employment at the end of the program. For CVOC's newest FAP award, program leaders decided to add monetary incentives at key program milestones, including employment placement and documented retention, during quarterly follow-up meetings. These incentives encourage persistence, recognize participant progress, and promote successful completion of occupational training and job placement activities. CVOC developed this approach in part by learning from other grantees through the FAP Community of Practice.



03. Putting the Model Into Practice

As long-standing recipients of federal and state funding, both CVOC and ETR are well versed in aligning their models with regulations and requirements from funders. As FAP providers, they have had to translate broad workforce goals into specific services and expenditures that are allowable, necessary, documented, and responsive to participant needs. Both organizations have employed two key strategies: identifying allowable expenses under FAP, and braiding FAP with nonpublic dollars to best meet the needs of their participants.

Navigating system constraints to identify allowable expenses

The California FAP initiative is governed by both federal and state regulations for the allowable use of WIOA funds for training and supportive services. FAP operator expenditures must also align with applicable [Employment Development Department requirements](#), [Uniform Guidance for Federal Awards](#), local policies, and participant eligibility rules. While navigating such regulations can be challenging, requiring technical expertise and persistence, both CVOC and ETR demonstrate what similar organizations can achieve.

Types of Allowable Financial Supports in California Under WIOA

Stipend (support for participation)

Fixed payments to participants for taking part in training or another workforce activity that requires a substantial or regularly scheduled time commitment. They are a form of financial support meant to help cover costs like living expenses, travel, or materials needed to be successful in training or workforce activities. They cannot be provided in lieu of wages.

Incentive (award for achievement)

Payments to participants for recognition and achievement tied to work experience, education, training, employment, or other program activities. They cannot be provided in lieu of wages.

Wages (relationship with an employer)

Payments participants receive when they are engaged in an employment relationship. Wage-and-hour rules apply.

Financial support services are allowable under WIOA when they are necessary for an eligible FAP participant to take part in career or training activities. An individual's eligibility, the type of activity, and local policy affect what form of assistance they may receive. Examples can include transportation assistance, child care and dependent care, housing and utilities support, books and supplies, tools, uniforms, educational testing, licensing and certification fees, and other costs that remove barriers to training or employment. WIOA also allows funds to be used for short-term paid work experiences and on-the-job training, which may be funded in part through a cost-sharing arrangement with the employer.

Both CVOC and ETR have used FAP funding to provide some of the supports participants need to stay engaged on their pathways to new careers, including transportation assistance, such as gas cards and vehicle registration fees; emergency food vouchers; rental and utilities assistance; and clothing and tool vouchers. As one CVOC participant shared, “The gas cards make a big difference, especially with the cost right now. I drive 45 minutes to get [to the CVOC center], so it helps a lot to get the gas funds to get here and back.”

Braiding public and nonpublic funding to expand services

To address other participant needs, both CVOC and ETR also rely on partnerships and co-enrollment to connect participants to services beyond what the FAP grant alone can provide. This type of approach, often called [*braided funding*](#), expands the support available for education, employment, transportation, basic needs, and work-based learning by aligning services from multiple funding sources to serve participants. Strong community partnerships are critical to the success of braided funding strategies. Partners with access to nonpublic funding are especially beneficial, because it is often less restrictive than public funding in meeting the broad needs of participants and their families.



Both CVOC and ETR administer a range of public and nonpublic programs and have deep partnerships in the communities they serve, allowing for strong braided funding approaches to truly meet the needs of their participants.

04. Key Takeaways

Financial Supports Help Program Participants Move Forward

The experiences of CVOC and ETR demonstrate that the California FAP is not simply a training program with extra services. It is a coordinated pathway that considers participants' immediate economic realities, prior experience, aspirations, family responsibilities, and dignity as part of workforce design.

Several lessons stand out for the field:



Seek innovative solutions for meeting participant needs.

Both CVOC and ETR recognize that no single funding source is likely to address all of the barriers that their farmworkers face when seeking a new career. By understanding what expenses are allowable under WIOA and where additional funding sources are needed, they are able to build partnerships and engage in co-enrollment strategies to better serve their participants. This braided funding approach is also an important strategy for sustaining work beyond a single grant investment.



Start with urgent needs, without losing sight of the long-term goal.

CVOC and ETR address transportation, child care, utilities, food, clothing, licensing, technology, and other needs that can determine whether a participant is able to begin or continue in their program or succeed in a new job. At CVOC, participants have described gas cards, vehicle registration assistance, training stipends, and other supports as practical help that reduces stress and makes program persistence more realistic.



Capitalize on existing infrastructure for paid work experience.

Smaller organizations do not need to build paid work experience systems from scratch. By partnering with workforce boards and public agencies that have already established systems and employer relationships to support participant placements, as ETR has, organizations can make paid work experience feasible while reducing the administrative burden and focusing resources on participant support.

**Treat trust as critical program infrastructure.**

Staff members from CVOC and ETR are known in the communities they serve. Their relationships have been built through years of outreach in the field, community centers, apartment complexes, and partner sites. ETR participants shared that staff members checked in and continued asking how things were going after employment. CVOC participants also described individualized support and staff members' willingness to help them find another career pathway when the first one did not work out. These high-touch practices depend on staff members who know the community and communicate with its members regularly.

For CVOC and ETR, advancement begins when a farmworker can see a credible next step and has enough support to take it. The organizations' approach, starting with trust and adding essential financial supports, is a model that other farmworker advancement programs can replicate.



Building a Future
That Works
For Everyone