



Older Workers: Department of Labor Should Help State and Local Partners Share Promising Practices

GAO-26-107439

Q&A Report to Congressional Requesters

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Why This Matters

Older workers represent an increasing share of the U.S. workforce. From 2003 to 2023, individuals 55 and older increased their share of the workforce from 15 percent to 23 percent, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Research has suggested that greater life expectancy, improved educational attainment, and increases to the age for receiving full Social Security benefits are among factors that may have contributed to greater workforce participation among older adults.

Federal workforce development programs may help older workers manage challenges that could affect their ability to find and retain jobs, such as demand for new skills or limited knowledge of effective job search strategies. These programs are administered primarily by the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Education through a network of state and local partners.

We were asked to review employment support for older workers. This report provides information on the share of workforce program participants who are 55 and older, their perspectives as participants, and their employment rates after exiting the programs. This report also examines the extent to which DOL has helped state and local partners share information to support older workers.

Key Takeaways

- Individuals 55 and older accounted for about 22 percent of participants (769,000 individuals) across six selected federal workforce development programs we examined using program year 2023 (July 2023 through June 2024) data, the most recent. Compared to younger participants, these older adults were less likely to find a job after exiting a program. For example, about 60 percent of older adults reported having a job in the second quarter after exiting DOL-administered programs—compared to about 69 percent of participants ages 40–54 and 73 percent of participants ages 16–39.
- Older workers we interviewed at job centers in five states said participating in workforce development programs helped them learn digital literacy skills and get employment and training opportunities in their communities. They also described challenges obtaining a job, including navigating the job application process, developing new skills, and managing potential age discrimination by employers.
- Job center officials told us that the older workers they served had unique employment needs compared to younger workers. They said additional support or tools focused on older workers would help them better meet these needs. Some state and local partners in locations we visited had initiatives to address the needs of older workers. However, these were ad hoc practices. We recommend that DOL facilitate information sharing among its partners on promising practices that could support this population.

Which federal agencies and programs help older workers find jobs?

DOL and Education administer several federal workforce development programs that include older workers among their participants. We selected six of these programs for our review: five that are administered by DOL and one by Education.

DOL-Administered Programs

Three Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs. DOL's Employment and Training Administration administers three workforce programs for adults under WIOA. These programs are the WIOA Adult, WIOA Dislocated Worker, and Wagner-Peyser programs.¹

- Both the **WIOA Adult** and **WIOA Dislocated Worker** programs provide individualized career and training services to customers. Additionally, the Dislocated Worker program proactively reaches out to workers who have been laid off and provides resources and guidance to employers to help prevent future layoffs.
- The **Wagner-Peyser** program provides job search assistance and other services to jobseekers and refers qualified workers to help employers meet their hiring needs.

WIOA establishes a system for federal, state, and local partners to implement workforce development programs that coordinate the needs of jobseekers and employers. State and local partners include workforce development boards that manage a network of American Job Centers. These job centers offer a range of free services to help jobseekers find work, including career counseling, job search assistance, and access to resources like computers and printers. They also provide resources for employers, including recruitment and retention strategies. Other partners include non-profit organizations that have received competitive federal grants to operate workforce development programs.

Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). SCSEP serves a subset of low-income, unemployed workers who are 55 and older, including many with low employment prospects.² It is the only federal program that exclusively serves older workers. SCSEP was initially authorized by the Older Americans Act in 1965.³ Program participants work part time in community service settings, receive on-the-job experience and skills, and are paid the hourly minimum wage within their state.⁴

Trade Adjustment Assistance for Workers (TAA) program. TAA provides aid to workers who have lost their jobs or whose hours of work and wages have been reduced because of increased imports. The program was initially established by the Trade Act of 1974 and was most recently reauthorized under the Trade Adjustment Assistance Reauthorization Act of 2015. DOL started phasing out the program in July 2022 based on provisions in the 2015 reauthorization. Accordingly, DOL can no longer accept new TAA program participants.

Education-Administered Program

WIOA Vocational Rehabilitation. Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration administers disability employment programs including the State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program, which is funded by WIOA.⁵ Under this program, states receive grants to help prepare individuals with disabilities for employment and economic self-sufficiency. Customers may include older workers with disabilities.

How many participants in these programs are 55 or older?

In program year 2023, older adults accounted for about 769,000 participants across the six programs we examined (see table 1).⁶ These older adults made up about 22 percent of all program participants. Program year 2023, which ran from July 2023 through June 2024, was the most recent complete year of data available at the time of our review.

Table 1: Individuals Ages 55 and Older Served by Selected Federal Workforce Development Programs, Program Year 2023 (July 1, 2023–June 30, 2024)		
Program (administering agency)	Number of participants 55 or older	Percentage of participants 55 or older
Wagner-Peyser (DOL)	544,991	22 percent
Vocational Rehabilitation (Education)	106,536	12 percent
WIOA Dislocated Worker (DOL)	45,458	22 percent
Senior Community Service Employment Program (DOL)	41,827	100 percent
WIOA Adult (DOL)	29,157	11 percent
Trade Adjustment Assistance for Workers (DOL) ^a	1,296	34 percent
Total	769,265	22 percent

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Labor (DOL) and Department of Education program data. | GAO-26-107439

Notes: Most of the programs in this table—including Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs—are operated on a program year basis, which runs from July 1 of a given year to June 30 of the following year. For example, program year 2023 ran from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. However, the Trade Adjustment Assistance for Workers (TAA) program is operated on a fiscal year basis. To align our analysis of TAA data with the program years used by the other programs we examined, we requested that DOL provide us with TAA data for July 2023 through June 2024.

^aDOL started phasing out the TAA program in July 2022 based on provisions in the Trade Adjustment Assistance Reauthorization Act of 2015. Accordingly, DOL can no longer accept new program participants. As a result, the total number of TAA participants is lower compared to previous years.

Education officials noted that—while older adults represented about 12 percent of Vocational Rehabilitation program participants—more than half of participants in this program were 25 or younger. They stated that youth participation increased following WIOA’s amendments to the Rehabilitation Act related to serving students and youth with disabilities.⁷

What services did older adults use compared to younger program participants?

Older adults used career services about as often as younger participants, but older adults were less likely to use training services.

Career Services

Older adults used basic and individualized career services at similar rates as younger program participants. Basic career services include, but are not limited to, initial skills level assessments, job search and placement assistance, and assistance with referrals to other programs and services. Regardless of age, nearly all participants in the WIOA Adult, WIOA Dislocated Worker, Wagner-Peyser, and TAA programs used basic career services in program year 2023.

About 57 percent of older participants and 59 percent of younger participants in WIOA Adult, WIOA Dislocated Worker, and Wagner-Peyser programs used individualized career services. These services include, but are not limited to, individual employment plans, financial literacy services, English language acquisition, and integrated education and training programs. Individualized

career services must be made available to a participant if job center staff determine that the participant needs them to obtain or keep a job.

Training Services

In the programs that offer training and serve adults of all ages, a smaller percentage of older adults used training services compared to younger participants (see table 2). Training services include, but are not limited to, occupational skills training, on-the-job training, and adult education and literacy activities. DOL officials said older adults may be less likely to use training services due to family or financial commitments, such as paying college tuition for their children or caring for aging parents. Such commitments might make immediate employment a priority and may limit their availability for participating in training. Officials also said individuals who are closer to retirement age may not be seeking new jobs skills if they plan to exit the workforce in the next few years.

Table 2: Percentage of Participants That Used Any Training Services in Selected Federal Workforce Development Programs That Offer Training, Program Year 2023

Program	Ages 55 and older	Ages 16-54
Trade Adjustment Assistance	57 percent	80 percent
WIOA Adult	23 percent	45 percent
WIOA Dislocated Worker	14 percent	25 percent
Vocational Rehabilitation	14 percent	29 percent

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Labor (DOL) and Department of Education program data. | GAO-26-107439

Notes: Most of the programs in this table—including Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs—are operated on a program year basis, which runs from July 1 of a given year to June 30 of the following year. For example, program year 2023 ran from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. However, the Trade Adjustment Assistance for Workers (TAA) program is operated on a fiscal year basis. To align our analysis of TAA data with the program years used by the other programs we examined, we requested that DOL provide us with TAA data for July 2023 through June 2024.

Within the WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker programs, older adults who used training services sought occupational skills training more than other training types such as on-the-job training.

What did older workers we interviewed say about their experiences in these programs?

Older workers we spoke with said they benefitted from workforce programs by learning digital literacy skills and getting a job that offers involvement in their communities, among other things. They also noted challenges, such as the types of jobs and employers participating in job fairs and participation limitations in some workforce programs. We obtained these perspectives by conducting discussion groups and individual interviews with 41 older workers at job centers in five states. See below for photos of older adults using services at job centers we visited.

Figure 1: Older Adults Using Job Center Services



Participant using a computer workstation inside a job center



Participant receiving digital literacy training

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-107439

Benefits of Participating in Workforce Development Programs

Older workers we spoke with discussed various benefits to participating in workforce programs delivered by job centers and local partners, including learning digital literacy skills, having opportunities to assist people in their communities, and receiving other support the programs offer.⁸

- **Digital literacy skills.** Many older workers said learning digital literacy skills helped them, including by obtaining necessary skills for employment and completing job applications.⁹

Statements from Older Workers About Digital Literacy Training

"I found out ... that we have classes here [at the job center], so I've been taking them. I took the beginner computer class, now I'm in the second one, and I am learning a lot. ... [Employers are] asking for skills for Microsoft and all those other ones, and I can't wait to get to Excel. It's really helping."

"They do offer Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel certificates [at the job center] that you can pick up here in 1 day... It's open to the public and you don't need to be collecting unemployment to use [the] services. ... My computer skills were so lacking."

"I learned how to use a computer here [at the job center]. Now that I learned how [to use a computer], I bought one at home. I didn't have one at home because I didn't know how to use it."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-26-107439

- **Opportunities to assist others.** Most of the 13 SCSEP participants in our discussion groups and interviews said the program offered them opportunities to assist others in their communities and to earn income. For example, a SCSEP participant told us they enjoyed their training assignment working with other older workers and performing various handyman tasks at an elementary school in their community.
- **Employment training.** Several older workers said they took trainings offered through job centers that provided opportunities for them to reskill and earn certifications for in-demand professions.

Statement from an Older Worker About Job Center Training

"I was able to afford to go to the class that it took for me to get the present job I'm in now as a medical assistant. So I needed that training in order to get a job to be ... financially stable."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-26-107439

- **Assistance for those with disabilities.** Two older workers with disabilities we interviewed said workforce programs helped them find jobs they could perform. Additionally, one said program staff helped them arrange necessary accommodations with their employer.
- **Help with the job application and interview process.** Many older workers told us that job center staff provided them with strategies for creating resumes and preparing for job interviews, which increased their chances of being hired.

Challenges Participating in Workforce Development Programs

Older workers we spoke with also discussed challenges including program limitations and having limited employment opportunities.

- **SCSEP participation limitations.** A few older workers said their participation was limited by annual caps on the number of SCSEP participants or reduced training hours due to budget constraints.¹⁰ Additionally, officials at one job center told us that some older workers who qualify are not interested in participating because the minimum wage is not enough to meet their expenses.
- **Training limitations.** Training for professional certifications at some job centers prioritized participants without a college degree or limited the types of certifications participants could earn. For example, one older worker we interviewed said they were interested in applying for a state workforce grant—a supplement to federal student financial aid—to pay the tuition and fees for obtaining professional certificates. However, they learned from job center officials that they did not qualify because they already had a bachelor's degree. Having less than a college degree was one of the grant eligibility requirements set by the state. Additionally, officials at another job center said their state had authorized training funds for obtaining professional certificates for a few in-demand job fields that did not necessarily align with jobs older workers in their area were seeking.
- **Limited employment opportunities.** Several older workers expressed disappointment with the limited number of employers and a lack of quality employment and training opportunities. For example, older workers told us that some employers were not present at a job fair as advertised and that the jobs offered at job fairs were for entry-level positions. Two older workers we interviewed also said that a limited number of employers participated in SCSEP, which also limited the types of training individuals could pursue. A few SCSEP participants also told us they disliked their training assignments. For example, one individual said they expected advanced on-the-job training in their assignment but were processing paperwork instead.

What did older workers tell us they were seeking from work in this phase of their lives?

Older workers we spoke with told us they preferred jobs that addressed their financial needs and provided a purpose and community connection. They also said they sought jobs that offered medical benefits, flexible work arrangements, and work that was less physically demanding.

- **Financial needs.** More than half of the older workers we interviewed said they were not ready for retirement or were seeking income to meet their everyday expenses. Several older workers we spoke with wanted to supplement their Social Security income or were not eligible yet for full Social Security retirement benefits.

Statements from Older Workers About Their Financial Need to Work

"I'm 63 years old. Job security is one of my main focuses ... because I'm one check from being homeless. I pay \$1,800 for a one-bedroom apartment ... so now I need more money."

"I have a mortgage, and my son ... started at [a] university ... so I'd like to support him if he needs extra money. My husband passed away about 15 years ago, so I'm hoping to be done working and start collecting Social Security at [age] 60 from him."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-26-107439

- **Purpose and community connection.** About half of the older workers we interviewed told us that employment gave them a purpose outside their home or allowed them to connect with people in their communities.

Statements from Older Workers About Work Providing Purpose and Community Connection

"I go to work every day, and I like it. I like being with people. I like talking to people. I like being here to help them. And it's something to do than just hanging around. So, it's just nice to get up and get dressed and go in. And if it's even for 4 or 5 hours, it's worth it."

"I need to get up and move and do something, because isolation can be very dangerous. It can cause me to go into a depression, so ... I feel better when I'm able to get up, get out, get dressed, you know. Meet people, talk to people and just engage in life."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-26-107439

- **Employer-sponsored medical benefits.** Several older workers told us that medical insurance was an important workplace benefit, which contributed to their overall well-being.

Statement from an Older Worker About the Importance of Employer-Sponsored Health Care Benefits

"I used to be the main provider of health care in my previous jobs, so that's another reason for me needing another paycheck because health care is really expensive. And neither my husband or myself are old enough for Medicare yet. I'm going through ... the [health insurance marketplace] right now, and it's expensive."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-26-107439

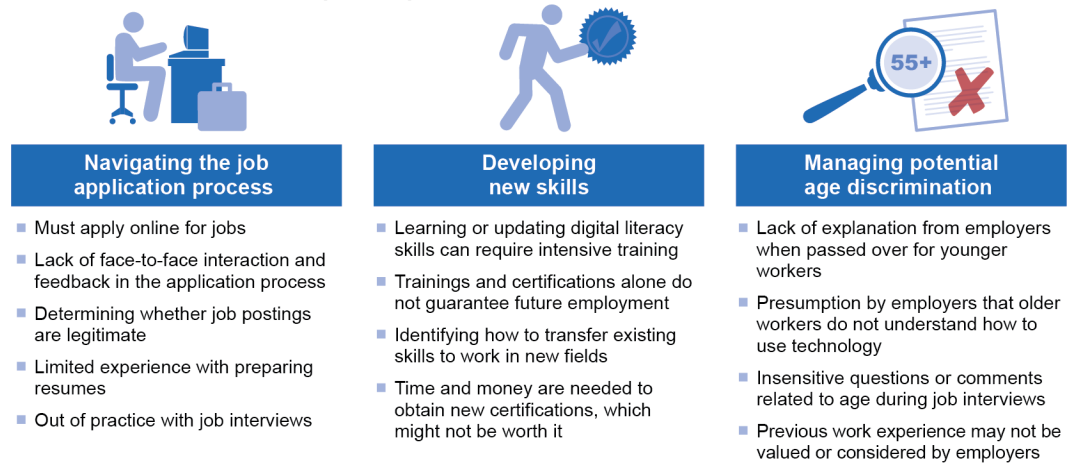
- **Flexible working arrangements.** Many older workers said they liked flexible work schedules and employment arrangements, including having the option to work part time. Several individuals experienced in using computers in their jobs also said they wanted the option to work remotely.

- **Less physically demanding work.** Several older workers said they desired jobs that were not physically demanding because of their physical limitations. Several told us their physical health precluded them from doing physically demanding work, such as jobs that required heavy lifting. According to job center staff we interviewed, some employers will provide reasonable accommodations to their older employees with disabilities to help them perform the duties of the job.

What employment challenges did older workers in the locations we visited experience?

Older workers described several types of employment challenges, including navigating the job application process, developing new skills, and managing potential age discrimination by employers (see fig. 2). Job center officials also discussed some of these challenges and strategies for managing them. Older workers and job center officials also discussed how employment challenges can lead to mental and emotional health concerns, which can make finding a job even harder.

Figure 2: Employment Challenges for Older Workers Identified by American Job Center Officials and Older Worker Discussion Group Participants



Source: GAO interviews with job center officials and discussion groups with older workers. | GAO-26-107439

Navigating the job application process. Several older workers told us they faced challenges navigating the job application process. This process may be challenging if they have not applied for a job in many years. A few described difficulties applying online for jobs. For example, one individual told us they were not computer savvy and needed assistance from job center staff to help submit an online job application for a fast-food position. Another individual said they wished they could have more personal interactions with potential employers because they had difficulty getting their job applications past automated resume screening tools.

Developing new skills. A few older workers told us they might need to consider additional training or certifications to be competitive in the job market. For example, one individual who was laid off from the technology field told us that it was challenging getting hired because they were competing with recent college graduates for jobs. After they received a technology certification funded through the TAA program, they became more competitive and found a job.

However, older workers can face challenges finding employment after receiving training or certifications. For example, one individual told us that, although they received training as a phlebotomist, they were not able to get a job in the medical field because they lacked relevant work experience.

Officials at a few job centers explained that part of their role is helping individuals see how they can transfer their existing skills to new job fields and that extensive training may not be necessary. For example, officials at one job center told us a former sewing machine repair technician got a job as a manager for a small engine repair company by emphasizing their existing skills and taking some basic computer classes to broaden their digital literacy skills.

Managing potential age discrimination. Many older workers told us they believed they experienced some form of age discrimination. Several told us they believed age discrimination was the reason they lost their job or were unable to advance in their career. For example, two older workers we interviewed believed they were targeted for termination because of their age when they were placed on performance improvement plans.

Statements from Older Workers About Perceived Age Discrimination in the Job Application Process

"[Employers are] looking for newer, younger ... 'techie' people that are really sharp with technology ... and they don't want to train us older people. ... I found with being turned down on jobs is [employers determine] you didn't meet our qualifications. But what qualifications didn't I meet? They don't have to spell it out, and I think they really need to spell it out."

"I thought it was a pretty good interview, but one of the last things that one of the interviewers said was 'I just need to figure out whether you're going to fit in with the team.' And I've never had problems fitting in with any kind of team, and so I wasn't sure what she was getting at. But after the fact, I found out that a person was hired in the same position ... was very young and right out of college ... I don't know ... if that person fit into the team better because he was younger."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-26-107439

Even though age discrimination is illegal, officials at several job centers stated that age discrimination in employment still occurs. Officials said they try to help older jobseekers overcome potential age discrimination challenges, such as by learning how to highlight essential information in their resumes and practicing interviewing skills. They said they also work with employers to dispel misconceptions and help employers see how older workers can fit within their organizations.

Statements from Older Workers About Their Experiences with Perceived Age Discrimination on the Job

"My last employer, in the 5 years I was there, no one under the age of 40 was let go for any reason."

"I had all the abilities, I had all the everything, and I got passed over... [for] a younger person. ... They just said, you know, 'we brought in a new person instead,' which was another cashier so they could learn."

Source: GAO discussion groups. | GAO-26-107439

Mental and emotional health. Several older workers we spoke with said they were dealing with difficult circumstances while seeking employment, such as personal injuries or the loss of loved ones. Older workers expressed frustration with the challenges finding and maintaining employment at their age, and a few questioned whether it was worth continuing to seek employment. Additionally,

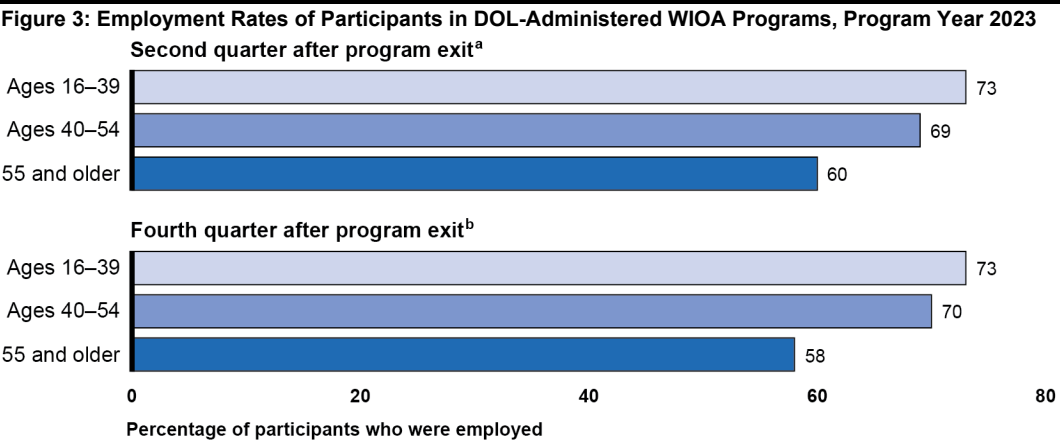
some job center officials said they could not address older workers’ employment needs without also listening to their personal struggles and connecting them with mental health or other supportive services, as needed.

What were the employment outcomes for older adults who participated in workforce programs?

In general, older adults who participated in the workforce programs we examined were less likely to find a job than younger participants in the same programs.¹¹ In contrast, differences in earnings between older and younger participants varied by program.

Employment

DOL-administered WIOA programs. In program year 2023, about 60 percent of older adults reported having a job in the second quarter after exiting DOL-administered WIOA programs. In contrast, about 69 percent of participants ages 40–54 and 73 percent of participants ages 16–39 reported having a job (see fig. 3). Exit from a program generally occurs when a participant has not received services for 90 days and does not have plans to receive future services.



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Labor (DOL) program data. | GAO-26-107439

Notes: DOL-administered Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs include the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Wagner-Peyser programs. Program year 2023 ran from July 2023 through June 2024.

^aSecond quarter employment rates are the percentage of participants who were in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program. Exit from a program generally occurs when a participant has not received services for 90 days and does not have plans to receive future services.

^bFourth quarter employment rates are the percentage of participants who were in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program.

To further examine these data, we conducted a regression analysis to control for selected characteristics that could affect employment rates, such as race and ethnicity, educational attainment, and employment status at the start of the program. We found statistically significant differences in employment rates across all three age groups after controlling for these characteristics.¹²

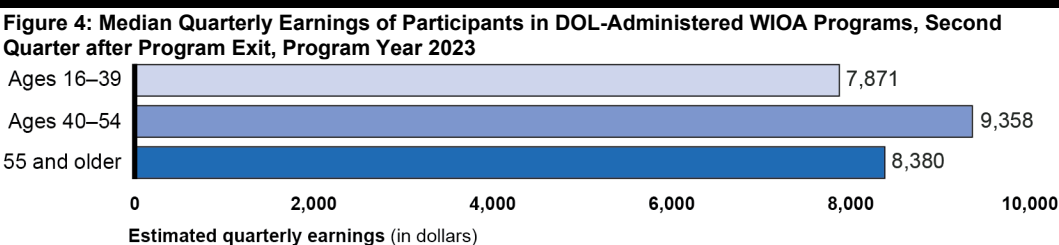
Vocational Rehabilitation program. We also found differences in employment rates by age group in the other workforce programs we examined. For example, in program year 2023, about 50 percent of older adults in the Education-administered Vocational Rehabilitation program reported having a job in the second quarter after exiting, compared to about 54 percent of participants ages 40–54 and 58 percent of participants ages 16–39.

TAA program. Among the six programs we examined, the TAA program had the highest rates of employment across all age groups. However, the differences in employment rates between older and younger participants were also greater for TAA than for the other five programs. Specifically, for the period from July 2023 through June 2024, about 68 percent of older adults reported that they had a job

in the second quarter after program exit, compared to 83 percent of participants ages 40–54 and 87 percent of participants ages 16–39.

Earnings

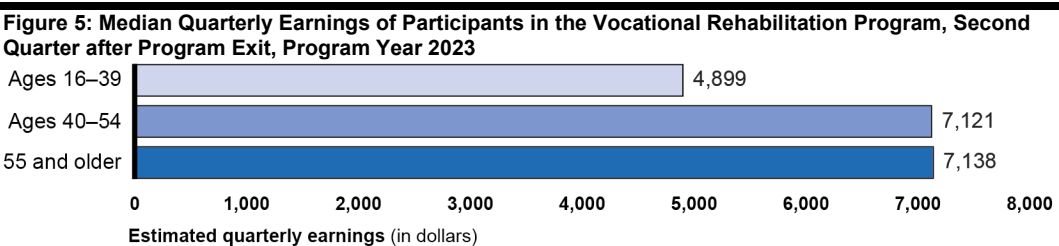
Older adults in DOL-administered WIOA programs reported lower median earnings after program exit compared to participants ages 40–54. However, they reported higher earnings than participants ages 16–39 (see fig. 4). Additionally, older adults who participated in the TAA program reported median quarterly earnings around \$2,000 less than both younger age groups.



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Labor (DOL) program data. | GAO-26-107439

Notes: DOL-administered Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs include the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Wagner-Peyser programs. Program year 2023 ran from July 2023 through June 2024. Exit from a program generally occurs when a participant has not received services for 90 days and does not have plans to receive future services. As specified by WIOA performance indicators and measures, median quarterly earnings are the median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program, regardless of the number of hours worked.

In contrast, older adults in the Vocational Rehabilitation program reported slightly higher earnings compared to participants ages 40–54. Both older age groups reported median quarterly earnings that were about \$2,200 greater than participants ages 16–39 (see fig. 5).



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education program data. | GAO-26-107439

Notes: Program year 2023 ran from July 2023 through June 2024. Exit from a program generally occurs when a participant has not received services for 90 days and does not have plans to receive future services. As specified by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act performance indicators and measures, median quarterly earnings are the median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program, regardless of the number of hours worked.

SCSEP Employment and Earnings Performance Goals

In program year 2022, 26 percent of Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) participants who exited the program were employed during the second quarter after exiting the program. This fell below the program’s target goal of 31 percent employment. The employment rates for program participants in the fourth quarter after program exit also fell below target goals by about 7 percentage points. These workers reported median quarterly earnings of \$3,248 in the second quarter after program exit, which was slightly below the target goal of \$3,350.

Source: SCSEP Program Year 2022 Performance Report (ETA-9173-SCSEP). | GAO-26-107439

Notes: Program year 2022 ran from July 2022 through June 2023. Exit from a program generally occurs when a participant has not received services for 90 days and does not have plans to receive future services.

How do state and local partners make older workers aware of these programs?

State and local partners use a variety of methods to inform potential customers, including older workers, about their programs, from paid advertising to attending community events. For example, job center officials we interviewed in all five states said their outreach methods included one or more of the following: newsletters, radio and TV spots, website and social media posts, bulletin boards in community locations, and direct communication at partner locations and community events (e.g., churches, baseball games). However, older workers we interviewed at job centers generally said there was a lack of awareness in their communities about the services offered by job centers. Many said they learned of the job centers through word of mouth, when they filed for unemployment insurance, or when they were referred by other service providers rather than through advertising or outreach events held by the job centers.

DOL regulations on affirmative outreach state that grant recipients must take appropriate steps to ensure they are providing equal access to WIOA Title I programs, including for individuals in different age groups.¹³ However, job centers have flexibility to implement outreach activities as they see fit and may consult DOL's guidance and suggested practices. For example, DOL issued guidance in 2023 to state and local partners to clarify allowable uses of grant funding for outreach activities and to provide examples of how grant recipients can use funds for outreach to jobseekers and employers.¹⁴

Additionally, to help ensure that grant recipients' outreach activities increase program awareness among older workers and other groups, DOL's Employment and Training Administration monitors grant recipients' outreach activities as part of its overall monitoring of grant agreements. For example, its core monitoring guide includes questions for reviewers to ask, including which populations the grant recipient is targeting in its participant recruiting activities and its strategies for improving the effectiveness of outreach.

How have state and local partners sought to address the employment needs of older workers?

State and local partners have implemented some initiatives focused on older workers, but job center officials we interviewed in all five states said additional support, such as dedicated positions or customized training, would help them better meet the needs of older workers.

Job center officials in all five states told us the older workers they served had unique employment needs compared to younger workers, including more support developing digital literacy skills and navigating modern job search practices. For example, officials at a few job centers told us that some older workers have never owned a computer or have rarely used them. They added that, as some older workers transition from physically demanding jobs like construction or manufacturing into new types of work, they may need additional training, including digital literacy, to be competitive with other jobseekers.

We learned about initiatives in five states we visited that addressed the needs of older workers. These included an online seminar, in-person digital literacy classes, professional skills workshops, and a job fair.

- **Online seminar for individuals 50 and older.** Officials from one job center we visited discussed an initiative they started that was inspired by AARP's Future of Work@50+ initiative. In the multi-day online seminars, older adults from across the state learned how to network and gain skills to become more competitive in the job market.
- **Digital literacy classes.** One job center held regular digital literacy classes for older workers. Participants told us they greatly valued the patience of their instructor, which resulted in a better understanding of how to use computers.¹⁵

- **Professional skills workshops.** Several job centers held workshops for older workers. Topics included applying for jobs online, resume writing strategies, and preparing for interviews.
- **Job fair.** One local workforce board sponsored an in-person job fair for older workers.

We identified additional examples of initiatives focused on older workers in the WIOA State Plans, which states use to outline the 4-year strategy for their workforce development system. For example, two states established or developed plans for offices focused on older workers issues. Another state established a task force to advocate for older workers and to ensure effective coordination of services for this population.

To what extent has DOL sought to address the employment needs of older workers?

DOL has supported older workers in several ways, including by funding research and providing online tools and resources for older workers. For example, DOL is currently funding a [multi-year study](#) to evaluate its workforce programs' effectiveness in serving older workers. DOL also provides tools and resources for older workers on the CareerOneStop website it sponsors.

As discussed previously, we found that older workers faced challenges that may affect their employment prospects and earnings. We also learned about efforts among state and local partners to address the needs of older workers. However, DOL has not developed a formal mechanism to facilitate information sharing among these partners to share these practices.

DOL has many ways to share information, including by issuing technical guidance or using its online platforms. For example, DOL has conducted webinars to help state and local partners share practices on a range of issues through its WorkforceGPS website. However, these sessions have not focused on older workers. Additionally, DOL officials said its Employment and Training Administration meets weekly with Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration to manage a wide range of issues across the workforce programs they administer. However, officials said they have not coordinated on technical assistance specifically focused on the employment needs of older workers.

DOL is responsible under WIOA for providing technical assistance and facilitating the sharing of promising workforce development practices among state and local partners.¹⁶ Additionally, DOL's Employment and Training Administration has a performance goal to create workforce solutions for all workers.¹⁷

DOL officials stated that the agency has not facilitated sharing of promising practices that could support older workers because DOL's mission is to help all workers find jobs, and the workforce development practices the agency promotes are generally beneficial for all populations of workers. However, DOL officials noted that the agency previously used its authority to establish a Youth Systems Building Academy to provide training and technical assistance to state and local partners to help them implement practices to more effectively serve younger workers. Moreover, DOL officials said it would be an appropriate use of the agency's technical assistance authority and its coordination with Education to facilitate sharing of promising practices for serving specific populations such as older workers.

By helping state and local partners share information on ways they support older workers, DOL could potentially help address employment and earnings gaps for older workers participating in workforce programs. Improved employment outcomes would help older workers support themselves financially and be better prepared for retirement while bringing valuable knowledge and experience to the workplace.

Conclusions

Older workers represent an increasing share of the U.S. workforce—23 percent in 2023. Many are ready to fill gaps in the workforce and to help employers achieve their missions. However, many older workers experience significant barriers to employment. They also may not be aware of job center services that could help them overcome the various challenges they face. Moreover, customized approaches may be needed to effectively meet the employment, training, and supportive service needs of older workers. DOL has helped state and local partners share promising workforce development practices. However, these efforts have not focused on older workers. Similarly, in coordinating with Education to oversee the workforce development system, officials have not focused on issues specific to older workers. Helping workforce system partners support older workers—whether through online tools or technical assistance events—could improve employment rates and earnings of older workers in federal workforce development programs. In turn, DOL would be helping these older workers support themselves financially, maintain a sense of purpose, and prepare for retirement while contributing their knowledge and experience to the workplace.

Recommendation

The Secretary of Labor should ensure that the Employment and Training Administration, in coordination with Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration, facilitates information sharing among state and local partners on promising practices both to address the employment needs of older workers and to increase their awareness of job center services. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOL and Education for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in Appendix I of our report, DOL agreed with our recommendation. DOL stated that it would enhance its coordination with Education to identify and share promising practices to address the employment needs of older workers and increase their awareness of job center services. Education provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

How GAO Did This Study

To select federal workforce development programs to include in this study (out of 38 programs that serve adults), we focused on four core WIOA programs that serve older workers, among other customers, and two other programs in which older workers make up a large share of participants.¹⁸ The four core WIOA programs we included were the Adult, Dislocated Worker, Wagner-Peyser, and Vocational Rehabilitation programs. We also included SCSEP, which exclusively serves individuals 55 and older, and the TAA program, in which older adults make up about a third of program participants.

To examine the participation and employment outcomes of older workers in the selected workforce development programs, we analyzed participant-level and aggregate data from program year 2023 (July 2023 through June 2024). Specifically, we analyzed publicly available participant-level data on the WIOA Adult, WIOA Dislocated Worker, and Wagner-Peyser programs. We analyzed aggregate Vocational Rehabilitation program data provided by Education. We also shared data provided by DOL on the number of SCSEP participants in program year 2023 and summarized program year 2022 SCSEP performance data that were previously reported by DOL. Additionally, we analyzed participant-level TAA data DOL provided us for July 2023 through June 2024. We determined that the data sources we used for the six programs we examined were reliable for our purposes by interviewing agency officials about the data, reviewing technical documentation, and testing for missing data, outliers, or obvious errors.

Using these data, we compared the participation and employment outcomes of older adults to sub-groups of younger program participants. We calculated employment rates and median quarterly earnings using DOL formulas for these performance measures.

We also used the participant-level data on the WIOA Adult, WIOA Dislocated Worker, and Wagner-Peyser programs to conduct a regression analysis to control for selected characteristics, including race/ethnicity, sex, education, employment status at entry, disability status, veteran status, geographic location (state), and whether the participant received public assistance. Standard errors were clustered at the state level.

To describe older workers' experiences accessing workforce development programs and seeking employment, and to determine how state and local partners ensure that older workers are aware of these programs, we conducted in-person site visits to 10 job centers across five states (Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Virginia, and Washington). We interviewed job center officials at each location and conducted non-generalizable discussion groups and interviews with older workers who had received services from the job centers. In total, we interviewed 41 older workers across nine discussion groups and five individual interviews. Except for one discussion group and one individual interview that we conducted virtually, we held our discussion groups and interviews in person at the job centers. To help us schedule these discussion groups and interviews, we asked job center officials to identify individuals 55 and older who had sought or received services from the programs examined in our study. Our discussion groups included open-ended questions about individuals' experiences. We did not systematically ask about every potential benefit and challenge related to participants' experiences in the programs or their experiences seeking employment. Not all participants responded to each question the same way or stated whether they agreed or disagreed with the opinions and examples shared by other participants.

We selected job centers in locations where individuals 55 and older represented at least 20 percent of program participants within these local areas. To include variation in geographic and economic conditions, we visited states in five out of six DOL Employment and Training Administration regions and selected locations to provide a mix of higher and lower local unemployment rates across our selections. We also included a mix of urban and rural locations. To help ensure coverage across selected employment and training programs, we selected some locations with large numbers of TAA participants who were 55 or older. Many other areas in the country had few or no TAA participants.

To identify examples of state and local initiatives that support older workers, we reviewed the program year 2024 WIOA Unified and Combined State Plans for all 50 states, which were the most recent plans available at the time of our review. We also interviewed officials from selected state and local workforce boards and job centers about initiatives focused on older workers within their states.

To evaluate how DOL supports older workers and facilitates information sharing among state and local partners on serving this population, we interviewed DOL officials and assessed the department's activities against federal internal control standards on external communication. We also interviewed DOL and Education officials about their coordination on issues related to older workers.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2024 to January 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence

obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Kirsten Gillibrand
Ranking Member
Special Committee on Aging
United States Senate

The Honorable John Fetterman
United States Senate

The Honorable Elizabeth Warren
United States Senate

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Labor, the Secretary of Education, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

GAO Contact Information

For more information, contact: John D. Sawyer, Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security, SawyerJ@gao.gov.

Public Affairs: Sarah Kaczmarek, Managing Director, Media@gao.gov.

Congressional Relations: David A. Powner, Acting Managing Director, CongRel@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments: Meeta Engle (Assistant Director), Justin Gordinas (Analyst in Charge), Isabella Anderson, Andrew Bellis, Lilia Chaidez, David Dornisch, Randi Hall, Daniel Setlow, and Brennan Williams.

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Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Labor

U.S. Department of Labor

Assistant Secretary for
Employment and Training
Washington, D.C. 20210



January 12, 2026

John D. Sawyer
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

RE: Older Workers: Department of Labor Should Help State and Local Partners Share Promising Practices

Dear Director Sawyer:

The U.S. Department of Labor (Department) appreciates the information, analysis, and insights that the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has shared in this report. The Department and the Employment Training Administration (ETA) understands the importance of amplifying promising practices throughout the workforce system to strengthen the system's ability to effectively serve American workers. The Department currently shares promising practices and insights for serving the older worker population with frontline staff, grantees, and other workforce practitioners who support older workers on a day-to-day basis. These practices and insights come from research and evaluation, as well as ongoing program implementation—all of which inform the Department's capacity-building efforts and technical assistance to improve the workforce system's ability to serve older workers. However, the Department and ETA welcome opportunities to enhance its partnerships to expand the reach of these promising practices to further address the employment needs of the nation's older workers.

In the report, GAO recommends:

The Secretary of DOL should ensure that the Employment and Training Administration, in coordination with Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration, facilitates information sharing among state and local partners on promising practices both to address the employment needs of older workers and to increase their awareness of job center services.

The Department agrees with GAO's recommendation.

The Department currently delivers technical assistance for the workforce investment system through a few tools, including ETA's technical assistance website, WorkforceGPS, which provides workforce professionals and stakeholders with promising practices and peer conversations about effective and innovative employment and training services. ETA also

delivers technical assistance to state and local partners and facilitates peer-to-peer exchanges among grantees about promising workforce development practices.

This technical assistance has included promising practices for serving the older worker population, such as a webinar highlighting the most relevant career and occupational tools on CareerOneStop—the Department’s career, training, and job search website—for service providers focusing on older workers, as well as a webinar on digital literacy and resilience.

However, the Department welcomes the opportunity to enhance its existing partnerships and further expand the Department’s reach in serving older workers. The Department intends to enhance coordination with Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to identify and share promising practices aimed at addressing the employment needs of older workers and increasing their awareness of job center services. Improved coordination with RSA is particularly timely given the Department’s new interagency agreements with the Department of Education announced last month.

The Department will leverage this partnership with the aim of informing its ongoing knowledge-sharing practices. The Department will leverage capacity-building channels or platforms, such as WorkforceGPS—or other applicable tools as they emerge—to identify and share resources serving the older worker population. Through this coordinated commitment, the Department looks forward to further enhancing the workforce system’s understanding of the employment needs of older workers and improving older workers’ awareness of the job center services available to them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Henry Mack". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Henry Mack

Accessible Text for Appendix I: Comments from the Department of Labor

U.S. Department of Labor

Assistant Secretary for
Employment and Training
Washington, D.C. 20210

January 12, 2026

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Sincerely,

Henry Mack

Endnotes

¹Both the WIOA Adult and WIOA Dislocated Worker programs are authorized by Title I of WIOA, which authorizes programs and activities that support job training and related services to unemployed and underemployed individuals. Title III of WIOA amends the Wagner-Peyser Act of 1933 to make the Employment Service part of the American Job Center network. WIOA Title III maintains the core functions of the Wagner-Peyser Act, which include providing labor exchange services like job search assistance, job placement, and referrals to employers. WIOA was signed into law in 2014 but has not been reauthorized since it expired in 2020. Congress has continued to fund WIOA programs through the annual appropriations process.

²About 92 percent of SCSEP participants reported having “low employment prospects” in program year 2022, meaning they would not likely obtain employment without the assistance of SCSEP or another workforce development program according to DOL. SCSEP operates on a program year basis, which runs from July 1 of a given year to June 30 of the following year. Program year 2022—which ran from July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023—was the most recent year available for this data element at the time of our review.

³The Older Americans Act was last reauthorized under the Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020 (Pub. L. No. 116-131). This reauthorization expired on September 30, 2024.

⁴DOL temporarily paused the release of program year 2025 funding for SCSEP national grantees to conduct a review of the organizations receiving SCSEP funding to ensure alignment with the administration’s priorities, according to DOL officials we interviewed in July 2025. DOL officials acknowledged that some SCSEP participants were not receiving services while the department completed its review. In September 2025, DOL published updated guidance that allotted full program year 2025 funds for national grantees and provided them instructions on how to apply for these funds. See DOL, Employment and Training Administration, Training and Employment Guidance Letter No. 16-24, Change 1 (Sept. 30, 2025). As of November 2025, DOL officials stated that the department had released all program year 2025 funds for state and territorial grantees and about 98 percent of the funds for national grantees.

⁵Title IV of WIOA amends the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which authorizes vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities, to ensure that vocational rehabilitation services are available through American Job Centers.

⁶In this report, we use the terms “older workers” and “older adults” interchangeably. In our analyses of program data, we defined older adults to include any individual who was 55 or older at the time they began participating in the program. All four WIOA programs we examined as well as SCSEP are operated on a program year basis. However, the TAA program is operated on a fiscal year

basis. To align our analysis of TAA data with the program years used by the other five programs, we requested that DOL provide us with TAA data for June 2023 through July 2024.

⁷WIOA amended the Rehabilitation Act to expand the population of students with disabilities who may receive services and the kinds of services that state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies may provide to youth and students with disabilities who are transitioning from school to postsecondary education and employment. It also requires states to reserve 15 percent of their Vocational Rehabilitation allotment to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation services.

⁸Local job center partners include SCSEP providers and Vocational Rehabilitation program counselors employed by state agencies, among others.

⁹In this report, *a few* discussion group participants represents three to four participants; *several* represents five to nine participants; and *many* represents 10 or more.

¹⁰Decisions about caps on the numbers of SCSEP participants and available training hours are made at the discretion of the states and localities in managing the funds allocated to them.

¹¹We previously reported on policy options to enhance older workers' employment outcomes based on retirement security expert opinions. See GAO, *Older Workers: Employment Rates Rebounded and Personal Finances Remained Steady Following Pandemic*, [GAO-25-106962](#), (Washington, D.C.: May 13, 2025).

¹²Using program year 2023 data, we regressed indicators for having a job during the second quarter after exit and having a job during the fourth quarter after exit on selected characteristics, specifically race/ethnicity, sex, education, employment status at entry, disability status, veteran status, geographic location (state), and whether the participant received public assistance. Standard errors were clustered at the state level. We focused on these DOL-administered WIOA programs in our regression analysis because participant-level data on these programs were readily available for download from DOL's website.

¹³29 C.F.R. § 38.40.

¹⁴See DOL, Employment and Training Administration, Training and Employment Guidance Letter No. 03-23 (Sept. 6, 2023).

¹⁵Several states we visited included digital literacy training for older adults as part of plans they submitted to the Department of Commerce to apply for Digital Equity Act grant funding. However, according to state agencies, on May 9, 2025, Commerce sent termination of funding letters to recipients of grants authorized under the Digital Equity Act. The state workforce agency in one of the states we visited announced that it was actively working to assess the scope of this announcement and to determine the best course of action.

¹⁶29 U.S.C. § 3223(a)(1), (c).

¹⁷Federal internal control standards also state that agencies should communicate relevant and quality information with appropriate external parties. One attribute of effective communication with external parties includes establishing methods of two-way communication as appropriate to achieve the agency's objectives. See GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-25-107721](#), (Washington, D.C.: May 15, 2025), Principle 15.

¹⁸For a list of federal programs, see GAO, *Employment and Training Programs: Department of Labor Should Assess Efforts to Coordinate Services Across Programs*, [GAO-19-200](#), (Washington, D.C.: March 28, 2019), appendix V.