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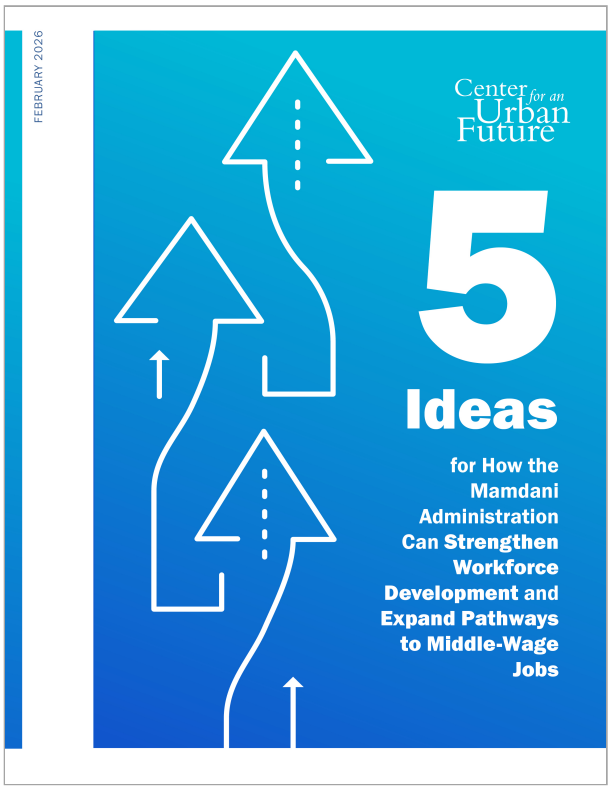

Report - February 2026

5 Ideas for How Mayor Mamdani Can Bolster Workforce Development

Too many New Yorkers are unemployed or stuck in low-wage work with little opportunity for advancement. This report's five ideas outline how the Mamdani administration can strengthen workforce development and expand access to middle-wage careers.

by Eli Dvorkin and Jonathan Bowles

New York City is confronting a two-sided affordability crisis. While rising housing, childcare, and transportation costs are squeezing households, just as consequential is a breakdown on the income side of the equation: too many New Yorkers are unemployed or stuck in low-wage work with little opportunity for advancement.

Workforce development is one of the most powerful tools available to city leaders to confront this challenge. The city's many excellent career training organizations and its public university system provide critical on-ramps to middle class employment, ensuring that New Yorkers from low-income backgrounds don't just gain access to a minimum wage job, but to career opportunities that offer family-sustaining wages and clear pathways for advancement.

Unfortunately, the city has not come close to fully leveraging the city's workforce development ecosystem. City investment has lagged far behind the need, and innovation has been slow.

What's more, the economic pressures on New Yorkers are likely to intensify in the year ahead. Today, roughly 1.1 million working-age New Yorkers are unemployed, underemployed, or earning minimum wage.[1] The market for entry-level jobs has plunged 37 percent since 2022, making it much harder for New Yorkers to get a foot in the door.[2] Several industries that historically provided accessible jobs—positions that did not require a college degree and often served as first jobs for immigrants and young people—appear to be permanently smaller than they were before the pandemic. For instance, retail alone employs nearly 55,000 fewer New Yorkers than it did in 2019 and shows little sign of recovering.[3]

Even more profound—and challenging—shifts are on the horizon. Advances in artificial intelligence are already reshaping the city's economy, augmenting thousands of jobs while demonstrating growing potential to automate many others.

Administrative and back-office roles, which have long served as gateways into middle-wage work and been especially important for women, are particularly exposed. While the full effects of AI will unfold over time, many of its consequences are likely to emerge during the Mamdani administration, increasing the need for a workforce system that can help adults reskill, advance, and transition into new roles.

These structural challenges are unfolding as overall job growth slows. Private-sector job creation fell sharply in 2025, down 71 percent compared to 2024, and unemployment has begun to tick back up across the city—marking the largest overall increase since May 2020 at the end of 2025. And the city's 5.6 percent unemployment rate conceals significant disparities, including an unemployment rate of 9.6 percent for Black New Yorkers as of December.[4] Together, these trends point to a more fragile labor market and heighten the risks of underinvesting in workforce development as the city's economy shows signs of faltering.

Raising the minimum wage beyond $17, as Mayor Mamdani has urged Albany to do, remains an important step. The minimum wage increases that began in 2013 were among the most effective anti-poverty measures of the past decade. But in a city with soaring costs, higher wage floors alone are not enough. Delivering on an affordability agenda will require sustained investment in the systems that connect New Yorkers to good jobs and help them adapt as the economy changes.

For Mayor Mamdani to succeed in tackling growing unaffordability, workforce development should be elevated to a top mayoral priority, treated as core infrastructure—like housing, childcare, or transportation—and backed up with bold, sustained investment in effective, flexible, and innovative pathways into middle-wage careers. Without a far stronger workforce development strategy, the city will struggle to help working-age adults move beyond subsistence wages, regardless of progress made on lowering household expenses.

The following five ideas outline how the Mamdani administration can strengthen workforce development, expand access to middle-wage careers, and put economic mobility at the center of the city's affordability agenda:

1. **Make a bold new investment in workforce development—through a NYC Talent Development Fund, a Career Impact Bond, a Workforce AI Readiness Fund, or by tapping funds from rezonings**—significantly increasing flexible, outcomes-driven city funding and creating new mechanisms to scale what works.

2. **Establish an Economic Mobility Cabinet and Workforce Czar in City Hall** to elevate workforce development inside city government, coordinate workforce policies across agencies, and hold the system accountable for results.

3. **Provide free OMNY cards and day-one childcare support for CUNY students and workforce training participants** to boost completion rates, accelerate credential attainment, and maximize returns on public investment.

4. **Launch a major effort to recruit the next 100 employers to partner on building pathways into good jobs** by expanding skills-based hiring, scaling employer engagement, and strengthening connections between CUNY, nonprofit providers, and industry.

5. **Help scale up CUNY's promising, but still small-scale, career success programs**—including CUNY Beyond, the Inclusive Economy Initiative, and CUNY 2X Tech—to ensure that more CUNY students don't just earn a degree, but also have strong career outcomes.

1. MAKE A BOLD NEW INVESTMENT IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT—THROUGH A NYC TALENT DEVELOPMENT FUND, CAREER IMPACT BONDS, A WORKFORCE AI READINESS FUND, OR BY TAPPING FUNDS FROM REZONINGS.

It will be difficult to succeed in tackling growing unaffordability without a far greater city investment in workforce development, particularly in programs that provide effective, flexible, and innovative pathways into middle-wage careers. The city's many proven workforce development programs can play a key role in ensuring that far more New Yorkers get on the path to well-paying careers—earning the income needed to afford to live in this high-cost city. But for too long the city has failed to adequately invest in this ecosystem, or develop innovative financing mechanisms to support these investments.

In recent years, the city has expanded investments in youth workforce initiatives, most notably the Summer Youth Employment Program, which now receives roughly $200 million annually to subsidize short-term summer wages. But investment in workforce programs serving working-age adults has not kept pace with the scale or urgency of today's needs.

Since the end of the Bloomberg administration, funding for adult-focused workforce programs has declined sharply at two agencies that oversee much of the city's workforce development system—down 43.4 percent at the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and 28.4 percent at the Department of Small Business Services (SBS). The mismatch between need and investment is stark. In FY2024, just 16 percent of the city's total workforce budget supported programs serving adults who are not on public assistance or living in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) housing. Nearly half of that 16 percent was directed toward adult literacy programs, which are critical but still serve a relatively small share of the adult population.[5]

Compounding these challenges is New York City's heavy reliance on federal workforce dollars. Nearly 40 percent of funding for the city's core workforce development programs flows from Washington. These funds are critical, but they come with strict limitations on how dollars can be spent and caps on per-participant costs, regardless of what it takes to deliver strong outcomes in a high-cost city. Too often, these constraints limit program quality, restrict innovation, and make it difficult to scale approaches that successfully move participants into well-paying jobs. At the same time, federal workforce programs face growing uncertainty, including potential funding cuts and new restrictions.

"It's hard to get real bang for our buck with federal funding alone. Statistically speaking, very few participants are making a wage that is livable in New York City," says Greg Morris, CEO of the New York City Employment and Training Coalition. "The question policymakers should be asking is: how do we allocate dollars that actually move people from low-wage to middle-wage work?"

The solution is to make greater use of local tax-levy dollars to boost college and career success, scale programs tied directly to middle-wage jobs, and invest in innovative models that require more resources but deliver stronger results. To accomplish this, Mayor Mamdani should make a sustained city commitment to build and strengthen workforce programs—and ensuring that city dollars are deployed flexibly and strategically to complement, rather than be constrained by, federal funding streams.

The Mamdani administration should consider the following four options for meaningfully increasing city funding for the workforce development ecosystem:

Create a NYC Talent Development Fund, using city tax-levy dollars to expand flexible, innovation-focused workforce programs.

Over the next four years, the city should significantly increase flexible, outcomes-driven workforce funding, particularly for working-age adults. City government should make a commitment to investing city lax levy dollars to create and strengthen workforce development infrastructure, spark innovation and partnership, and prioritize what providers know is most effective in supporting strong outcomes for jobseekers. City Hall should organize these new investments in the form of a NYC Talent Development Fund, which could be used to:

- Launch challenge-based procurements that catalyze new partnerships focused on moving New Yorkers into middle-wage jobs.

- Support workforce intermediaries that pool employer demand, reduce fragmentation, and improve system efficiency.
- Reverse chronic underinvestment in adult-focused workforce programs, where unmet need is greatest, while maintaining strong commitments to youth employment and training.
- Strengthen CUNY's role in both degree and nondegree workforce education, including incentives for partnerships that allow New Yorkers to earn college credit while in career training or participating in youth development programs.
- Fund rigorous testing and evaluation to identify what works and build the case for sustained public investment.
- Invest in upskilling and professional development for the workforce development sector itself.
- Integrate workforce development investments and capacity building into neighborhood rezonings.
- Deploy Workforce Navigators—working in partnership with Chambers of Commerce—to connect small and mid-sized employers to talent pipelines, training providers, and available incentives.
- Provide the technical assistance to seed new revenue-generating models, like Boston's Neighborhood Jobs Trust, which generates dedicated workforce funding from a modest surcharge on large new commercial development projects.

City dollars should be deployed where federal funding falls short—supporting intensive, high-quality models that deliver meaningful wage gains and career advancement, expanding services for New Yorkers at risk of losing assistance due to expanded federal work requirements, and building coordination across a fragmented ecosystem.

Establish a NYC Career Impact Bond that leverages public dollars to unlock private capital

To help supplement public funding, especially during a time of growing fiscal uncertainty, New York City should launch the city's first Career Impact Bond: a revolving, outcomes-based fund that mobilizes public, private, and philanthropic capital to scale the city's most effective career training programs.

Many of New York's strongest workforce programs serve only a fraction of demand, in part because they lack access to flexible, upfront capital. These programs are often costly to deliver, tuition-free for participants, and poorly served by federal funding streams that cap per-participant spending. A Career Impact Bond would address this gap by providing upfront financing tied to employment and earnings outcomes, with repayments recycled to support future participants. This idea builds on a successful initiative, Pay It Forward, launched in New Jersey in 2021. The initiative should be designed to protect borrowers and align incentives by explicitly tying repayment to earnings thresholds that meet or exceed local living-wage benchmarks, ensuring that only those participants who succeed are obligated to repay—a structure aligned with best practices nationally.

The mayor should work with the City Council to seed a $25 million Career Impact Bond, paired with a private match from employers, foundations, and impact investors. Eligible programs—including nonprofit providers and public institutions like CUNY—would need to demonstrate strong outcomes and a clear return on investment. Participants would gain access to interest-free financing that could help cover nontuition costs, too—from licensing requirements to childcare costs. At a time of mounting uncertainty over federal funds for New York, this approach would generate new, recurring dollars for workforce development while aligning public and private investment around economic mobility.

Launch a Workforce AI Readiness Fund and Mayoral AI Workforce Task Force

To prepare for the labor market disruptions posed by artificial intelligence, New York City should launch the nation's first Workforce AI Readiness Fund, alongside a high-level Mayoral AI Workforce Task Force.

Seeded with city dollars and matched by major AI companies, impact investors, and philanthropic partners, the Fund would support AI skills training across CUNY and nonprofit providers, upskilling and job-transition support for workers displaced by

AI-driven automation, and rapid-response training in occupations and industries most exposed to AI disruption. The accompanying Mayoral AI Workforce Task Force would bring together leaders in AI, economic policy, workforce agencies, employers, and practitioners to guide investment, anticipate risks, and develop AI Workforce Preparation Plans—from AI exposure and applied use to advanced technical training and displaced worker response—that help the city develop policies and investments that get ahead of the massive labor market transitions likely to unfold over the next four years.

Integrate workforce development planning and investments into neighborhood rezonings.

City leaders can also tap one other opportunity to inject new dollars into workforce development: through targeted investments made as part of the process of building community and political support for city-initiated rezonings.

As the new mayoral administration explores land-use changes to address a severe housing shortage and reignite job growth, city leaders face a persistent challenge: how to move rezonings forward equitably and ensure that long-time residents benefit economically from new development. Yet while recent rezonings have included commitments to tenant protections, infrastructure, and public space, investments in workforce development have been minimal or nonexistent—leaving a critical gap in efforts to make growth inclusive and boost incomes locally.

City Hall should make investments in career training and workforce development a core component of major rezonings, and partner with local intermediaries and workforce providers to build neighborhood-level pathways into good jobs in advance of new development. As part of this effort, the city should create a sharable framework of options for making local investments in workforce development infrastructure—options that very rarely, if ever, are presented to community boards, local advocacy organizations, or other stakeholders during the lengthy land-use review process. Doing so would help ensure that rezonings expand economic opportunity in the communities most affected, while also coupling income-boosting measures with investments designed to spur housing production.

A promising model to consider replicating is New York City Economic Development Corporation's Economic Mobility Networks, which coordinate place-based workforce development investments through community-based organizations, beginning with programs in Sunset Park and Hunts Point.

2. ESTABLISH AN ECONOMIC MOBILITY CABINET AND WORKFORCE CZAR IN CITY HALL TO ELEVATE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT INSIDE CITY GOVERNMENT AND ADVANCE POLICIES THAT EXPAND PATHWAYS TO GOOD JOBS ACROSS AGENCIES.

City funding will be essential to strengthening New York City’s workforce development system. But funding alone will not be enough. To deliver meaningful results, Mayor Mamdani will also need to elevate workforce development inside city government and give it a clear home at the highest levels of City Hall.

Today, workforce development in New York City is an ecosystem without a center of gravity. More than 21 city agencies play a role—from the Department of Small Business Services and the Human Resources Administration to CUNY, the Department of Education, the city’s libraries, and NYC Parks. Without high-level coordination, investments remain siloed, best practices struggle to spread, pilot programs rarely scale, and accountability is fragmented. Workforce programs may succeed in isolation, but pathways break down across agencies and funding remains piecemeal.

As in previous administrations, responsibility for workforce development remains scattered across multiple deputy mayors—including the first deputy mayor, operations, economic justice, and health and human services. With so many agencies reporting through different chains of command, advancing a coherent workforce development agenda becomes exceedingly difficult. At a moment of rapid economic change—driven by slowing job growth, rising affordability pressures, and

the looming impacts of artificial intelligence—this fragmentation is a serious liability. These challenges are compounded by varying and unchangeable funding requirements and performance expectations, further complicating coordination and accountability for outcomes.

At the same time, investments in workforce development are too often disconnected from the city's broader economic development strategy. Major rezonings, incentive packages, and sector-based growth initiatives frequently move forward without a clear plan for connecting New Yorkers—especially those facing barriers—to the jobs they create. If the city is serious about tackling affordability by expanding access to good jobs, this divide will have to close.

Mayor Mamdani has already taken steps to reshape the structure of City Hall. Housing and planning now fall under a single deputy mayor, and the former deputy mayor for economic development and workforce has been transformed into a new role focused on economic justice. These changes signal a strong commitment to worker protections and equity. But they also leave workforce development itself without a clear point of emphasis or ownership at the highest levels of government.

To address this challenge, Mayor Mamdani should pursue two complementary structural reforms: appointing a Workforce Development Czar and establishing an Economic Mobility Cabinet within City Hall.

The Workforce Development Czar should report directly to the mayor and be charged with coordinating workforce policy, funding, and accountability across agencies. This role would not replace agency leadership, but instead ensure alignment—setting shared goals around employer engagement, sector-specific pathways, education and training models, wraparound services, and government's own role as an employer, while making sure city investments stack up to meaningful pathways into middle-wage, family-sustaining jobs—and reallocating resources from initiatives that fail to deliver on these goals.

Complementing this role, an **Economic Mobility Cabinet** should bring together senior leaders from the agencies that most directly shape workforce outcomes, including SBS, HRA, CUNY, NYCHA, Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Department of Education (DOE), Office of Talent and Workforce Development (NYC Talent), and others. The cabinet would serve as a forum for aligning policy and practice across silos—connecting training with childcare and transit access, supporting innovative requests for proposals that align with clear goals, coordinating employer partnerships across agencies, and addressing barriers such as benefits cliffs and fragmented data systems.

"Given that so many mayoral and agency priorities intersect with these issues around jobs and opportunity, an economic mobility cabinet would be critical to growing the city's impact," says Marjorie Parker, president and CEO of JobsFirstNYC.

Together, these reforms would give City Hall a mechanism to move from a collection of programs and initiatives to a more integrated system—one that can scale what works, respond quickly to emerging labor market shifts, and hold itself accountable for results.

Going forward, the mayor could task the Workforce Development Czar and Economic Mobility Cabinet with an even more ambitious goal: developing a truly integrated Workforce Development Partnership—a successor to the current Workforce Development Board—capable of braiding public and private funding, mobilizing employer investment, and accelerating innovation across the system.

One model worth exploring is the San Diego Workforce Partnership, which evolved from the city's federally mandated Workforce Development Board into a distinct nonprofit organization closely aligned with city government. That structure has enabled San Diego to raise private dollars alongside public funding, engage employers more effectively, invest in innovation among training providers, and break down silos across agencies—all while serving the public good.

At a time when federal workforce funding is uncertain and economic disruption is accelerating, workforce development will need visibility and attention at the highest levels of government. By putting someone clearly in charge—and giving them the

tools to coordinate across agencies—Mayor Mamdani can ensure that the city's investment in workforce development translates into lasting opportunity for New Yorkers.

3. PROVIDE FREE OMNY CARDS AND DAY-ONE CHILDCARE SUPPORT FOR CUNY STUDENTS AND WORKFORCE TRAINING PARTICIPANTS.

As Mayor Mamdani works to deliver free buses and universal childcare—and has already chalked up a major early victory with the governor's support for 2-Care—the administration has an opportunity to act swiftly where affordability relief can generate the greatest impact. Providing free, unlimited OMNY cards and day-one childcare support to CUNY students and participants in workforce training programs would dramatically boost completion rates and accelerate pathways into middle-wage careers.

Now more than ever, the path to the middle class in New York City runs through higher education and sector-specific workforce training. But each year, tens of thousands of New Yorkers who enroll in CUNY or career training programs fail to complete them—not because they cannot afford tuition, but because they cannot afford essential non-tuition costs.

Today, more than two-thirds of in-state CUNY undergraduates attend tuition-free thanks to federal Pell grants and New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), and most nonprofit workforce training programs charge no tuition at all. Yet everyday costs—particularly transportation and childcare—continue to derail progress. For low-income New Yorkers juggling work, school, and caregiving responsibilities, even modest out-of-pocket expenses can make persistence impossible.

Transportation costs, in particular, have emerged as one of the most common and consequential barriers to completion. This challenge is especially acute at CUNY, where more than half of undergraduates live below the poverty line. Many CUNY students benefited from free transit passes while attending public high school, but that support disappears just as financial pressures intensify. CUNY's ASAP and ACE programs—which provide unlimited OMNY cards alongside advising and other supports—have boosted graduation rates by nearly 40 percent. Yet the majority of CUNY students receive no transportation assistance at all.

The same barriers confront participants in workforce training programs. Fewer than one in three nonprofit workforce development organizations are able to provide transit subsidies, even as most report that transportation costs are a key obstacle to enrollment and persistence.

Childcare presents an even steeper challenge. Many high-quality training programs require full-time participation for weeks or months at a time, yet accessing the city's existing childcare voucher system can take longer than the programs themselves. As a result, parents are often forced to choose between caregiving responsibilities and career advancement.

"Annette came to us to inquire about our program, but when she found out it was full time every day of the week she didn't come back because she didn't have the childcare to take advantage of that opportunity," says Plinio Ayala, CEO of Per Scholas, speaking to the Center for an Urban Future for a recent policy research report. "That's a story that our admissions department hears time and time again. New Yorkers shouldn't be prevented from acquiring new skills and preparing themselves for good-paying careers because of family responsibilities."

The solution is both straightforward and powerful. The Mamdani administration should guarantee two foundational "wraparound supports" for New Yorkers pursuing economic mobility: a free, unlimited OMNY card for all CUNY undergraduates and participants in evidence-based workforce training programs, and access to childcare support beginning on day one of training.

These supports would not merely lower household costs. They would make it far more likely that students and trainees complete their programs, earn credentials, secure employment, and move into middle-wage, family-sustaining

jobs—maximizing the return on the city's investments in education and workforce development.

To ensure these investments deliver results—and to build the case for sustained public funding—the city should pair these supports with rigorous testing and evaluation through NYC Opportunity, following the same evidence-driven approach that helped prove the effectiveness of CUNY ASAP before it was scaled citywide. This would allow the city to measure impacts on enrollment, persistence, completion, and earnings, and refine program design based on what works best.

New York City already has an encouraging model for addressing this challenge. Promise NYC, which provides childcare support regardless of immigration status and allows providers to place children immediately while billing the city after the fact, has shown how flexible, provider-facing systems can remove barriers to participation for working parents. Applying a similar approach to workforce training—ensuring childcare support is available from day one—would unlock opportunity for thousands of parents who are currently shut out of education and training.

These supports are essential to persistence and completion, yet current human services contracting and procurement rules often prohibit or underfund them, limiting providers' ability to invest in what participants actually need to succeed. Addressing contract structures, allowable costs, and cost-of-living adjustments is necessary to make these supports standard rather than exceptional.

The city also has multiple options to help pay for these investments—without making them contingent on any single revenue source. For example, New York City could consider allowing a modest amount of infill housing on select CUNY campuses and directing lease revenue toward transportation and childcare supports for students. The city could also explore expanding paid street parking on commercial corridors and major avenues, which could generate hundreds of millions of dollars or more in annual recurring revenue, and leverage a portion of those funds to provide free OMNY cards for New Yorkers in education and workforce training.

By focusing on transportation and childcare—two of the most consistent and solvable barriers to completion—the Mamdani administration can align its affordability agenda with concrete steps to boost economic mobility and expand pathways to middle-wage careers.

4. LAUNCH A MAJOR EFFORT TO RECRUIT THE NEXT 100 CITY EMPLOYERS TO PARTNER ON BUILDING PATHWAYS INTO GOOD JOBS.

No other city has as many larger employers as New York City—not just Fortune 500 companies, but hundreds of private firms employing thousands of workers across the five boroughs. These employers account for a disproportionate share of the city's well-paying jobs. Yet too many New Yorkers—especially those from lower-income backgrounds—still lack clear, reliable pathways into them.

Mayor Mamdani can take a major step toward expanding access to these good jobs by learning from the success of the New York Jobs CEO Council, an intermediary launched six years ago by Jamie Dimon and CEOs from roughly 30 of the city's largest companies to create skills-based hiring pathways for CUNY students and graduates of nonprofit training programs. To date, the Jobs Council has helped catalyze more than 40,000 hires of low-income New Yorkers into family-sustaining roles.

But while this ambitious effort is working, it remains limited in scope relative to the size of New York City's economy—and the scale of opportunity. It is time to develop new, expanded infrastructure that can bring many more employers into the fold.

To do so, the Mamdani administration should launch a major new initiative to recruit the next 100 large and mid-sized employers to partner with CUNY and trusted workforce development organizations to open well-defined, skills-based pathways into good jobs—with the goal of connecting another 100,000 lower-income New Yorkers to middle- and high-wage careers over the next decade.

New York City is home to thousands of growing businesses that are hiring every day across sectors including healthcare, education, finance, professional services, and tech. Many offer good wages, full-time hours, and advancement potential. Yet too few are connected to the city's talent development infrastructure, limiting how many New Yorkers can access these opportunities.

The Jobs CEO Council has demonstrated what is possible when employers are meaningfully engaged. In 2023 alone, its roughly 30 member companies—including JPMorgan Chase, Amazon, and Accenture—hired more than 10,000 low-income New Yorkers into jobs paying $69,000 or more. These outcomes were driven by deliberate partnerships with CUNY, apprenticeship programs, and nonprofit training providers—aligning employer needs with prepared talent.

Now is the time to expand or adapt this model to include the next 100 larger city employers.

While many of the city's very largest employers have established partnerships that are opening doors to good jobs for more New Yorkers, far fewer employers in the next tier down by size are actively engaged with the workforce system. A coordinated, mayor-led effort to recruit more of these firms could unlock significant demand for talent and expand opportunity for New Yorkers, while reducing the friction that employers face in navigating a complex ecosystem and fielding inbound requests from hundreds of different organizations.

This effort would also help address a persistent bottleneck facing the workforce development ecosystem. Many of the city's strongest training providers struggle to scale not because of a lack of results or funding alone, but because it is difficult to aggregate employer demand. Bringing at least 100 more major employers into structured partnerships would help pool that demand—allowing CUNY graduates and workforce training participants to move more efficiently into good jobs. At the same time, this expanded employer-facing intermediary could help align public and philanthropic investment with employer needs in several key areas—from reskilling and advancing current workers to hiring across vendors and supply chains to planning talent pathways in advance of major new economic development investments.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence are creating an additional—and unexpected—opening for deeper employer engagement. As AI-assisted job applications have proliferated, employers across industries are being inundated with thousands of applicants for a single opening, making it harder to pursue skills-based hiring and putting candidates skilled through alternative pathways at a disadvantage.

"Nearly every employer we speak with has seen a massive spike in applications for nearly every role," says Caitlyn Brazill, president of the nonprofit technology training organization Per Scholas. "That's created an impossible challenge for employers who want to do skills-based hiring but can't manage 3,000 applications for one job. Workforce organizations can offer real value here—we've spent months working one-on-one with our learners, we know their skills, and we can align employer needs with prepared talent far more effectively."

To make this effort succeed, the mayor should leverage the convening power of City Hall to recruit employers and lower the barriers to participation. This could take the form of a new public-private initiative or an expansion of an existing intermediary, supported by a challenge-based procurement process, industry and trade associations, borough-based chambers of commerce, and the city's Workforce Development Board.

Participating employers should be asked to commit to clear, measurable goals, such as hiring a set number of low-income or underrepresented New Yorkers, partnering with CUNY and nonprofit training providers, and tracking hiring and retention

outcomes. In return, the city can offer access to customized training grants, connections to vetted talent pipelines, technical assistance, and public recognition for leadership in advancing economic mobility.

To support this effort, the city should also continue expanding high-quality, employer-connected training models and leverage challenge-based procurement to incentivize the development of new pathways. This should include expanding apprenticeships in growing middle-wage industries through the NYC Apprenticeship Accelerator and strengthening employer partnerships at CUNY by investing in current initiatives to build campus-level capacity and better align curriculum and career services with employer needs.

Finally, this initiative should be closely tied to broader efforts to strengthen and modernize the city's workforce governance infrastructure. Policymakers should consider reforms to the Workforce Development Board that elevate CEO-level participation and explore new operating models, such as the nonprofit structure used by the San Diego Workforce Partnership. This revamped entity could ultimately house all of the city's industry-specific partnerships, bringing them closer to the private sector and reducing the competition for employers that affects both public and nonprofit programs.

By recruiting the next 100 employers into meaningful workforce partnerships, Mayor Mamdani can leverage his political capital to build on what is already working—helping companies meet their talent needs locally while opening doors to good jobs for tens of thousands more New Yorkers.

5. HELP SCALE UP CUNY'S PROMISING, BUT STILL SMALL-SCALE, CAREER SUCCESS PROGRAMS—INCLUDING CUNY BEYOND, THE INCLUSIVE ECONOMY INITIATIVE, AND CUNY 2X TECH.

No institution does more than the City University of New York (CUNY) to propel low-income New Yorkers into the middle class. Yet far too many students still struggle to translate academic achievement into strong career outcomes. Just two-thirds of CUNY graduates are employed within a year of graduation, and many earn wages that fall short of a living wage in New York City. Too often, graduates leave CUNY with a degree but little work experience or connection to employers—even in fields that typically lead to middle- and high-wage careers.

CUNY is now generating substantial momentum to address this challenge. Under Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez, the university has launched CUNY Beyond, a systemwide initiative aimed at ensuring that every student has access to career-connected learning. The university has worked to embed industry specialists in select departments, grow paid internship opportunities, and strengthen partnerships with major employers and nonprofit intermediaries. Early results are promising, with participating academic departments reporting higher internship participation, stronger job placement, and higher starting wages. But today, these efforts still reach only a fraction of CUNY's students.

Mayor Mamdani should seize the opportunity to help CUNY scale what is already working. In his first 100 days, the mayor should commit to strengthening CUNY's career success efforts and ensuring that every student has access to work-based learning and employer connections. That commitment should be reflected in his first budget, by fully integrating CUNY Beyond and significantly expanding the infrastructure needed to deliver career-connected education at scale.

In practice, that means expanding the Inclusive Economy Initiative to reach at least half of all CUNY academic departments, up from roughly 9 percent today, so that employer engagement is embedded across disciplines rather than concentrated in a small number of programs. It also means building campus-level capacity by hiring more hybrid academic–career advisors and industry specialists, ensuring students receive guidance that is tightly connected to their field of study.

Proven efforts such as CUNY 2X Tech—which has delivered strong outcomes by combining employer-informed curricula, paid work-based learning, and intensive career coaching—should be renewed and expanded, with their most effective elements embedded more broadly across colleges and the curriculum. At the same time, the Practitioners-in-Residence

Corps should continue to grow into additional sectors, including healthcare, business, and professional services, giving students earlier exposure to real-world practice and employer expectations by embedding industry professionals in the classroom.

The city should also set a clear, measurable goal: ensuring that at least 30 percent of CUNY students complete a paid internship or work-based learning experience before graduation. Without a target like this—and the resources to meet it—tens of thousands of students will continue to leave CUNY each year with degrees but limited work experience, even as employers seek candidates who can contribute on day one.

To support this expansion, the city should invest in the infrastructure needed to manage employer partnerships at scale. CUNY has begun piloting a systemwide Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform, but philanthropic dollars alone cannot bring it to full implementation. Today, campuses and central offices often maintain separate systems and contact lists, leading to duplicative outreach and missed opportunities. A fully scaled CRM would allow staff across all 25 campuses to share employer contacts, track outcomes, and coordinate engagement—creating a far more seamless experience for employers and helping CUNY align opportunities with student demand.

Finally, City Hall should reinforce these efforts by continuing to expand employer-connected training models across the system, including apprenticeships in high-growth sectors and deeper partnerships with high-performing nonprofit intermediaries. The city itself should also lead by example, dramatically expanding public-sector internships and career pathways for CUNY students. As one of New York City's largest employers, city government remains an underutilized launchpad for CUNY talent.

At a moment when entry-level opportunities are shrinking and competition for good jobs is intensifying, maintaining—and strengthening—CUNY's role as an engine of economic mobility should be a top priority for the next administration.

ENDNOTES

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the 2019-2023 5-year ACS. Unemployment data from the New York State Department of Labor, December 2025.

2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data on job postings in New York City seeking candidates with ?2 years of experience, via Lightcast.

3. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the New York State Department of Labor.

4. New York City Economic Development Corporation, "New York City Economic Snapshot," January 2026, https://edc.nyc/sites/default/files/2026-01/NYCEDC-NYC-Economic-Snapshot-January-2026.pdf.

5. New York City Employment and Training Coalition, https://nycetc.org/2025/03/new-report-putting-our-dollars-to-work/

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