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Making things work better for the working class



ELIZABETH MCINTYRE 

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I was encouraged recently to see, amid the polarized political times we are living in, that a serious group of scholars and policy experts could still get together and have meaningful conversations resulting in a straightforward plan of action for our congressional leaders to hopefully consider.

A group made up from representatives from [Opportunity America](#), the [American Enterprise Institute](#), the [Brookings Institution](#), the [Progressive Policy Institute](#) and the [Aspen Institute's Future of Work Initiative](#) will release its "[Work, Skills, Community: Restoring Opportunity for the Working Class](#)" report in late November.

Representatives of the alliance visited Northeast Ohio two weeks ago before touring western Michigan to hear from local economic planners, media and other voices in America's heartland, many of them voters who supported President Donald Trump during the 2016 election.

The authors of the report defined working class as those with at least a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree living in households between the 20th and 50th income percentiles – about \$30,000 to \$69,000 a year for a household with two adults and one child.

The working class in particular, the report notes, has faced strong economic and social headwinds since the 1970s that have left them disenfranchised and lagging other demographic groups.

"The American dream is fading for them," Bruce Reed, co-chair of the Aspen Institute Future of Work Initiative, said during a meeting with Crain's.

Their focus is on getting the working class who are not working back to work. And in increasing wages and prosperity for those who do work.

So how to make the things work better for the working class? How can they get back into jobs that can support their families?

The key is lowering barriers, said Tamar Jacoby, president of Opportunity America.

To do that, the study offers several suggestions, including:

- expanding the earned income tax credit
- making it easier to receive occupational licensing
- requiring agencies to prioritize getting government benefit recipients back to work
- reforming unemployment and disability insurance to promote work
- embracing job-creating investments expected from the creation of Opportunity Zones
- restructuring federal education financial aid to increase funding for programs that teach skills for the future, especially community colleges

On that last point, the group is clear that college for all is a failed concept and that training in technical and vocational fields will be key.

Because community colleges play such a key role in putting the "work" back into the working class – in providing those necessary skills to fill important jobs and provide sustaining wages for the working class – I'll explore in an upcoming column what Lorain County Community College is doing to achieve that goal.

Inline Play

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