

Eastern Bank Foundation Launches Career-Focused Program to Strengthen the Massachusetts Workforce

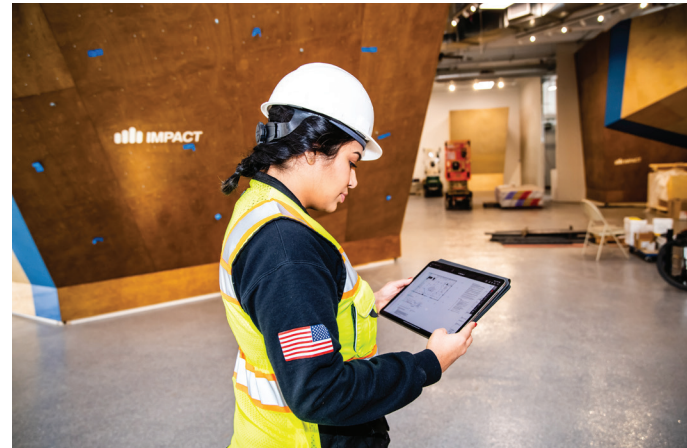


Photo courtesy of Thais De Marco Photography

and partner funders to coordinate, and refine an innovative, scalable system that prepares workers with enhanced language skills not just to get jobs, but to grow careers and build economic security for their families.

“This isn’t just another pilot. This is about moving beyond the cottage industry of providers and building a program at scale that can eliminate labor shortages and the wait list of learners, and help ensure the continued competitiveness, innovation and leadership of our local workforce and economy,” said Turahn Dorsey, President and CEO of the Eastern Bank Foundation, who is carrying forward along with the Foundation team the vision and launch of the program as established by Nancy Huntington Stager prior to her retirement from the Foundation. “We’re contributing to enhancing a system that prepares, employs, and advances the English language skills of workers at scale so that our local employers have access to a robust workforce and more families are also provided with a chance at obtaining a stable economic future.”

The initiative will move beyond the traditional and often fragmented English-as-a-second language (ESL) model. Instead, it will deliver programming aligned with workforce needs, structured to be flexible and accessible, and grounded in the science of how adults learn language. The initiative will be delivered through a statewide network of nonprofit partners and community-based organizations. Programs will offer services and instruction in

multiple formats including in-person, online, hybrid, and at the workplace so workers can participate without having to choose between their job and their education.

CFEP will also integrate real-time assessment tools, mentorship, and wraparound support services that reflect the everyday realities workers seeking to learn English face. Learners will be able to track their progress, receive personalized guidance, and navigate challenges that might otherwise derail their advancement.

According to MassINC’s 2024 report “Massachusetts Needs an Actionable Strategy to Expand ESOL Services,” there are more than 200,000 job openings across the state and labor shortages impacting nearly every industry, and businesses stand to benefit directly from a better-prepared workforce. The Foundation is inviting employers of all industries to shape the curriculum to ensure that instruction reflects the overall communication needs of their industry. They are being asked to establish learning opportunities in the workplace, provide mentors who can support learners on the job, and commit to hiring from within the CFEP pipeline.

The urgency is underscored by recent research from MassINC, which identifies English proficiency as the most significant barrier to economic participation for immigrant workers in Massachusetts. Despite increased funding in recent years, thousands of people remain on waiting lists for English instruction and many more

never apply due to cost, scheduling, or discouragement. Meanwhile, the supply of vocational English programs, those that link language acquisition with employment outcomes, remains especially limited outside of Boston.

By building a coordinated, statewide system that connects instruction, support, and job placement, Eastern Bank Foundation and its partners aim to eliminate the persistent mismatch between labor market demand and immigrant workforce potential. CFEP is grounded in the proven practices of contextualized instruction, strong community partnerships, job coaching, and data-driven evaluation.

The Foundation has already begun working with ten pilot programs across the state to test the system and generate feedback. These early efforts will inform statewide expansion with the goal of building a replicable model that can be adopted not only across Massachusetts, but in other states facing similar challenges.

For more information about the Career-Focused English Proficiency Initiative—or to learn how to become an employer partner—please contact foundation@easternbank.com.

Eastern Bank Foundation is the philanthropic arm of Eastern Bank. Through philanthropy, employee volunteerism, advocacy and collaboration, Eastern Bank Foundation responds to community needs and supports sustainable solutions to our communities’ most vexing challenges.

For generations, immigrants have helped to drive Massachusetts economic success and today their contributions continue to push the state forward. According to a 2022 Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation report, Massachusetts communities are losing a significant percentage of the workforce due to an aging population, with the workforce population (aged 20-64) at a peak in 2018 at 4.18 million and projected to fall by 180,000 by 2030. Replacing these workers will require an infusion of qualified people to fill the jobs, yet for both newcomers and immigrants who have already made a life in Massachusetts, one of the most consistent barriers to accessing and advancing in meaningful careers has been a lack of English proficiency and, more precisely, mastery of language skills related to their chosen professions. Now, the Eastern Bank Foundation is setting out to change that with a first-of-its-kind coalition of public-private partnerships that will build a statewide Career-Focused English Proficiency system that improves program access, offers employment opportunities and career pathways, includes ongoing support, builds resources, and uses proven methods of instruction.

The Career-Focused English Proficiency (CFEP) Initiative will build on existing research-based English-language learning opportunities designed specifically for the needs of the workforce. The program will be open to foreign-born and foreign-trained workers across Massachusetts, creating new pathways to employment, advancement, and long-term economic mobility.

At the heart of the CFEP initiative is a simple yet urgent fact: New Americans are essential to the Commonwealth’s future. However, more than 140,000 foreign-born residents remain unemployed or underemployed largely due to a lack of English proficiency. These are individuals with talent, training, and ambition but without access to the kind of language instruction and English proficiency that connects them to opportunities.

CFEP, led by the Eastern Bank Foundation, is a direct response to this workforce need. Over the next three years, the Foundation will work with state leaders, nonprofit training organizations, employers