

## YOUR EMPLOYMENT SOURCE

# Building the dream: Skills as a pathway to economic mobility



BY RICK BEASLEY

Black History Month is a time to honor resilience—and to keep faith with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s unfinished work. Dr. King insisted that civil rights and economic rights are inseparable: equality must be measured not only by access, but by outcomes—whether families can earn a living wage, build savings, and create stability for the next generation. In today’s economy, that moral test shows

up in a practical place: who gets access to skills, credentials, and real career pathways.

The data reminds us why economic mobility must stay at the center of our community agenda. In December 2025, the national unemployment rate was 4.4%, yet Black unemployment was 7.5%—a gap that represents thousands of households navigating uncertainty even when the broader economy looks steady. In 2024, median household income for Black households was \$56,020 and declined 3.3% from the prior year, tightening budgets at a time when costs remain high. Wealth—the cushion that helps families weather setbacks and invest in a home, education, or entrepreneurship—remains starkly unequal: Survey of Consumer Finances figures cited in analysis show median Black wealth at about \$44,890 in 2022 compared with roughly \$285,000 for White households.

Here in Miami-Dade, the urgency is visible in everyday life. Median

household income was \$68,694 (2019–2023), and 14.1% of residents lived in poverty. Housing costs add pressure. Zillow’s April 2025 rent report identified Miami as the least affordable large metro for rents, with the median household spending about 40.4% of income on a new lease—well above the 30% affordability threshold that signals rent burden. When rent consumes that much of a paycheck, it becomes harder to pay for training, start a business, or save for a down payment—exactly the steps that make upward mobility possible.

That is why workforce development is a civil-rights strategy for our time. Skills close gaps because they raise wages and reduce unemployment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2024, workers with a high school diploma earned a median of \$930 per week, while those with a bachelor’s degree earned \$1,543—and they faced lower unemployment (4.2% versus 2.5%). But degrees are not the only route.

“Earn while you learn” pathways—like registered apprenticeships—expand opportunity without forcing people to choose between income and training. A U.S. Department of Labor analysis found apprentices’ earnings rose 16%, compared with 5% for comparable workers, around the transition into apprenticeship.

Dr. King’s legacy challenges us to do more than celebrate progress; it calls us to build systems that make progress durable. That means expanding paid work-based learning, aligning training with high-demand sectors, and wrapping career services with supports like childcare, transportation, and digital access. When we invest in skill development at scale, we do more than fill vacancies. We expand freedom—one credential, one apprenticeship, and one family-sustaining job at a time.

*Rick Beasley is executive director of CareerSource South Florida*

