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Brent Orrell is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he works on job training, workforce development, and criminal justice reform. Specifically, his research focuses on expanding opportunity for all Americans through improved work readiness and job training, and improving the performance of the criminal justice system through rehabilitation and prisoner reentry programs.

Before joining AEI, Mr. Orrell worked in the executive and legislative branches of the US government for over 20 years. He was nominated by President George W. Bush to lead the Employment and Training Administration of the US Department of Labor, and he served as deputy assistant secretary for policy at the Administration for Children and Families at the US Department of Health and Human Services.

In his 1861 State of the Union message, President Abraham Lincoln wrote that “labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.” What did he mean by this?

Lincoln, though a contemporary of Karl Marx, was no Marxist. What he recognized, however, was the essential truth that economic activity was not first and foremost about dollars and cents or goods and services. Rather, economics and free markets are about the creativity, ingenuity, and—in his day—the muscle of human labor. His thoughts on labor were integral to his opposition to slavery, which he saw as one man “wringing his bread from the brow of another.”

COVID-19 has us thinking about the importance—and fragility—of human labor. It has become blindingly apparent once again that our economic life is an outgrowth of our shared humanity. Looking at the praise heaped on “essential workers” who have continued to work and serve their communities at the risk of their own health, we’ve come to

appreciate the vast, invisible web of labor and exchange that makes our economy run, and how dependent we are on one another’s ingenuity and work.

The intricacy of the web of human relationships that make up our economy means that we do not have a single human being to waste. Placing the protection of life and health first at all times, but especially during COVID-19, is fundamental to economic recovery and prosperity for all levels of our society. By necessity then, we need to look to the parts of our society that are being most heavily impacted by the virus—low-income working-class people, minorities, and those over 65—and focus special attention on protecting and supporting them.

The death counts in these populations are tragedies. They deprive families of loved ones who are intrinsically valuable, and they deprive our economy of ideas and labor without which we cannot thrive. Our physicians and nurses are working hard to save these lives, and our scientists are racing to produce a safe and effective vaccine or drug that will prevent illnesses and deaths. On both humanitarian and economic grounds, these efforts must be at the center of our thinking when it comes to public policy.

Workers will need help after this crisis—and we must show the same willingness to honor and value labor as Lincoln did. My AEI colleague, Mason Bishop, and I have produced a report with recommendations to Congress and the administration for a revitalized workforce development system that serves workers as they plan futures for themselves and their families. Our plans include the use of personal reemployment accounts that will empower workers, especially those at or near the bottom of the labor market, to seek the education and training they need to not just survive, but thrive on the job. By promoting and enabling access to family-sustaining

jobs, we can address income and wealth disparities for low-income and minority individuals, families, and communities. Government can help facilitate this job-matching process by providing workers with better information and support in the training and workforce journey. And, finally, we can expand available opportunities by lifting unneeded regulations and giving states, workers, and businesses the flexibility they all need to grow and prosper.

Human-capital strategies must begin with human beings in mind. What do people require in order to build the right capacities and skills for prosperity? That's where our proposals begin, and also where they must end. Our goal must always be an America that honors Lincoln's dictum that human labor deserves our highest consideration.

