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LEADERSHIP FORUM ON
RETIREMENT SAVINGS

What's the Future of Retirement Savings? We Get to Choose.

Insights from the 2025 Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings

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About the Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings

This annual Forum gathers leaders from industry, government, consumer advocacy, academia, and beyond under Chatham House Rule, which, by allowing participants to share what was said without attribution, creates a trusting space for the frank dialogue necessary to grapple with the issues that have prevented the building of an inclusive savings system that achieves retirement security for all. The ultimate goal of the Forum is to accelerate convergence on critical dimensions of policy and marketplace innovation that will enable all workers in America to meaningfully participate in such a system. Given the scope of the issues and their profound impacts on American households' financial security, there is an urgent need to bring together a diverse group of powerful voices to chart the way forward, and the Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings serves as the premier venue for this critical dialogue.

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About the Rapporteur

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About the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program

The Aspen Institute Financial Security Program's (Aspen FSP) mission is to illuminate and solve the most critical financial challenges facing American households and to make financial security for all a top national priority. We aim for nothing less than a more inclusive economy with reduced wealth inequality and shared prosperity. We believe that transformational change requires innovation, trust, leadership, and entrepreneurial thinking. Aspen FSP galvanizes a diverse set of leaders across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to solve the most critical financial challenges. We do this through deep, deliberate private and public dialogues and by elevating evidence-based research and solutions that will strengthen the financial health and security of financially vulnerable Americans. To learn more, visit AspenFSP.org, join our mailing list at http://bit.ly/fspnewsletter and follow The Aspen Institute Financial Security Program on LinkedIn.

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LEADERSHIP FORUM ON
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Letter to the Reader

The 2025 Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings marked a pivotal moment—not just in the life of this event, now in its ninth year, but in the broader movement to build a retirement savings system that works for everyone.

In recent years, we've seen remarkable momentum—from SECURE Acts 1.0 and 2.0 to state auto-IRA programs—that proves meaningful, modern retirement reform is not only possible, but popular. This summer, Trump Accounts were signed into law as a new federal initiative that will seed portable, funded retirement accounts for children born between 2025 and 2028.

We're getting a glimpse at what a stronger system could look like. Now comes the harder part: matching the scale of the opportunity with that of the challenge. That means building a bigger tent, aiming higher, and moving faster.

As we look ahead to the Forum's 10th anniversary in 2026, we're not just reflecting—we're building. We're shaping what the Forum will become, what the Retirement Savings Initiative at the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program will aim to achieve by 2030, and how we meet a moment that feels more urgent, more complex, and more filled with possibility than ever before.

It's only fitting that this year's Forum report reflects this thinking. In the pages that follow, you'll find our rapporteur's careful reporting of the conversations as they happened—and Editors' Notes that capture our reflections on what stood out, what signals change, and what holds the most promise for action.

Retirement saving is complex, and we've also come to believe that we all need a shared framework for our shared "to-fix" list and to understand where others are best positioned to pitch in. So for the first time, we've included a new visual, the **Lifecycle of a Retirement Saver**. Inspired by Forum conversations over the past nine years, it maps the journey from first access to retirement savings, through the saving and investing years, to the challenge of turning those savings into lasting income and affording life after work. The breakdowns in this lifecycle are improving, thanks to the work of Forum participants. And yet, there are still too many places where people fall off track.

That's the tension at the heart of this work: America's retirement savings system is working for millions. And failing millions. Both are true. But failure isn't inevitable. The system isn't working yet. But it can.

(Continued on next page)

That's why we're evolving our own approach. We're organizing our work around the three stages of the retirement savings lifecycle—Access, Save and Invest, and Retire. Access will continue to be an important pillar of our work, explored at the **Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings**, as well as through other convenings and projects. Similarly, the **Workers' Wealth Lab**, launched in 2024 with our partners at the Defined Contribution Institutional Investment Association and Morningstar, will continue to focus on how we can make the save-and-invest cycle work for everyone, regardless of income, profession, race, gender, or generation.

And we're launching a new effort: **The Retirement Income and Affordability Lab**. Each pillar is designed to tackle systemic failures in their phase of the lifecycle. Think of them as three puzzle pieces—distinct in shape and focus, but designed to fit together. We'll bring the work and the people together to ensure ideas and innovations flow across the full retirement journey. Because it's only when the puzzle pieces connect that the full picture of financial security comes into view.

These efforts have grown too big for a single annual event. They deserve year-round focus, momentum, and collaboration. And we want—and need—more leaders at these tables.

The Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings will remain the place where all these worlds come together. Where unlikely allies shape shared goals. And where the most important voices in the room are the ones advocating for the workers who are too often left out.

Because ultimately, it's our collective responsibility to decide who this system serves. The design choices we make—about access, incentives, defaults, and supports—will determine whether the next generation of retirees is more secure than the last. A system this consequential should work for everyone.

We're grateful you're here. We invite you to dive in—and to stay with us as we build the next chapter of this work. There's more to do, and we're just getting started.

Warmly,

Karen Biddle Andres
Director, Inclusive Saving and Investing

KC Boas
Retirement Savings Initiative Lead

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“Finishing” America’s Retirement Savings System

America’s retirement savings system represents both remarkable success and unfinished business. Since the introduction of the first 401(k) in the 1980s, workplace-based retirement accounts have amassed nearly $30 trillion in wealth held by 71 million households, covering 54 percent of Americans and proving the system’s powerful wealth-building potential.[1]

Yet this success remains incomplete and bypasses millions. Some 56 million American workers still lack access to workplace retirement plans,[2] and another 23 million who do have access aren’t participating, missing out on a critical wealth-building opportunity.[3] By the time these workers reach retirement, just 4 million stand to benefit from the full “trifecta” of retirement income security: a defined benefit plan, a defined contribution plan, and Social Security.[4]

Of the millions being left behind, the vast majority are low-income workers. It’s a classic market failure hidden in plain sight. But it is also a solvable problem. As participants at the 2025 Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings agreed, there is reason for optimism. Over the past decade, policy breakthroughs, market innovation, and cross-sector collaboration have shown that real progress is possible. We can build a retirement savings system that works for everyone.

Consider what’s already underway:

- **State auto-IRA programs in 17 states have added almost a million new accounts with $2 billion in assets and counting, expanding access to those previously excluded;**
- **In-plan emergency savings solutions, student loan matching contributions, the introduction of the Saver’s Match, and more legislative achievements through SECURE and SECURE 2.0 Acts are making it easier for Americans to save and invest, driving more money into the accounts that need it most; and**
- **Innovations in retirement income solutions have led to more streamlined and affordable options, paving the way for a more holistic approach to income in retirement.**

Retirement security remains a rare bright spot of bipartisan action—and these innovations prove that system improvements are possible when stakeholders align around common goals.

Now in its ninth year, the Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings continues to serve as a trusted space for cross-sector leaders. This year's Forum surfaced broad agreement on the system's central paradox: It generates immense wealth for millions, while still leaving too many behind. To close that gap, leaders are coalescing around three critical priorities:

1 **Access**
Ensure all workers can access and participate in workplace-based retirement savings

2 **Save and Invest**
Enable effective wealth accumulation through automatic, consistent savings; appropriate investment strategies; and preventing early withdrawals that undermine long-term savings

3 **Retire**
Manage income streams so accumulated wealth and benefits can last a lifetime

When individuals have a stake in the economy—a meaningful stake that promises long-term financial security—they're more likely to feel invested in our shared economic and civic future. A retirement system that delivers on that promise for everyone is not only achievable, it's essential.

The challenge is substantial *and* solvable. Market failures persist not because we lack solutions, but because we haven't fully deployed them. With knowledge, collaboration, and commitment, we can ensure that every American has the opportunity to access, build, and sustain the wealth needed for lifelong financial security.

OVERHEARD

"Change moves at the speed of trust. Today's wins are built on conversations going back a decade or more. Tomorrow's wins begin with our conversation today."

The Retirement Savings Lifecycle: Access, Save and Invest, Retire

Retirement is the ultimate financial report card—for individuals and for America. When Americans near the end of their careers, their financial situation reflects not just decades of the ups and downs of a financial life but also the strengths and failures of the retirement savings system itself.

Ultimately, success is graded on three criteria:

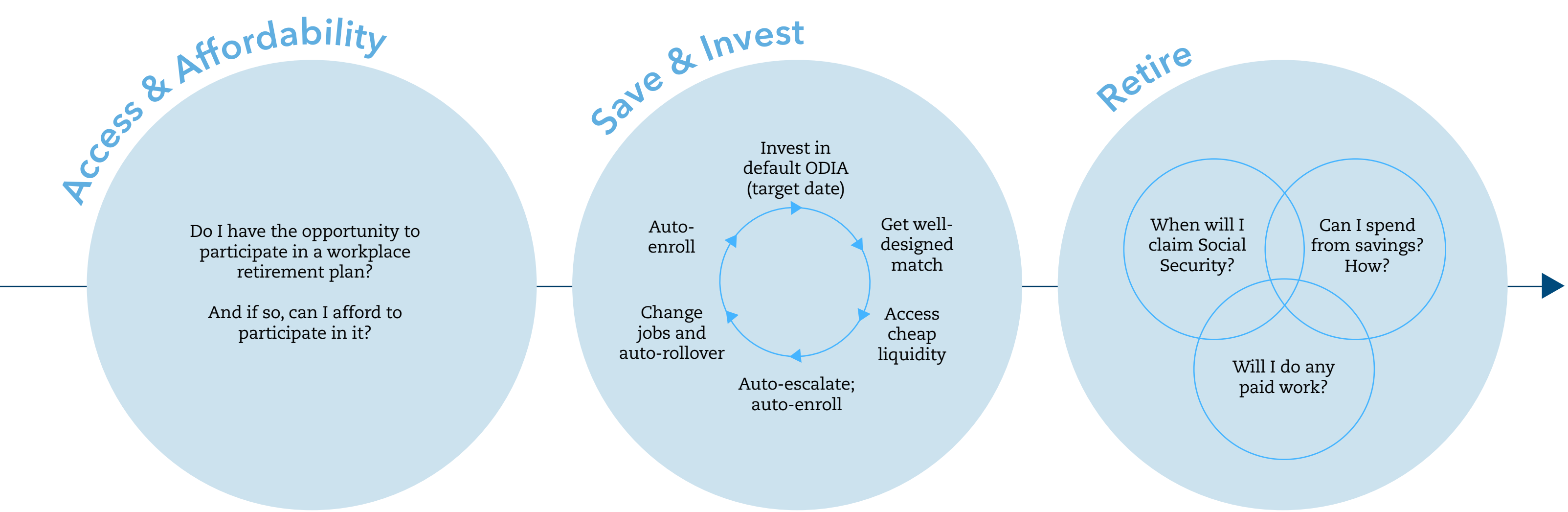
1. Access: Was there opportunity to participate in a workplace retirement plan, and can we afford to do so?

2. Save and Invest: Was there opportunity to consistently build wealth?

3. Retire: Can that wealth now be converted into reliable retirement income, and can we manage our expenses?

Lifecycle of a Retirement Saver

Inspired by the discussions of the last nine Forums



When any of these receives a failing grade—for the person or the system—the consequences are real and lasting. Today, too many low-income workers reach retirement without sufficient resources—not because they failed, but because the system did.

Editors' Note

Or, perhaps the system hasn't failed … yet. Perhaps it's just earned an "incomplete."

America's retirement savings system was built in phases. Social Security in the 1930s, then employer-sponsored pensions and 401(k)s in the decades that followed. Now it's time to finish the job with targeted upgrades that ensure no worker is left out.

This year's Forum marked a turning point. With growing evidence from successful innovations—like state auto-IRAs and the coming Saver's Match—participants moved from diagnosing problems to championing proven solutions. **The debate is no longer whether we can build a system that works for low-income households—it's how.** And as that shift happens, the conversation is becoming more pointed, even heated, with strong views on which approaches should be scaled and how fast.

In the sections ahead, we explore each of these three criteria: Access, Save and Invest, and Retire. At the Forum, participants explored the conditions shaping each, the solutions underway to close gaps, and the additional solutions and tools needed to finally deliver a finished retirement savings system where every American has an opportunity to succeed.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *"We decide who gets to be financially secure based on our choices. We do not get to turn back the tide, but we do get to pick who's on the boat."*

Access: Open the System to All Workers

At the inaugural Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings in 2017, universal access was a topic of debate, with participants quite divided on whether it should even be a goal. Over time, however, evidence has reshaped the conversation. State auto-IRA programs, powered by the requirement that employers automatically enroll their employees, have demonstrated measurable success—both at bringing more people into the system and by encouraging the creation of new private sector plans. Meanwhile, technology has made it easier and less expensive for small- and medium-sized businesses to open new plans.

Today we know that workers with access are 15 times more likely to save for retirement. Yet, 56 million Americans still lack that access.[5, 6] And, more than 5 million low-income workers and workers with disabilities are penalized from participating due to savings penalties.

Now, nine years later, Forum participants reached clear consensus: Achieving 100 percent access is the top priority. The question is no longer if, but how.

Conditions Shaping Access to Retirement Savings

At this year's Forum, participants grappled with powerful, long-running forces that are impacting the ability of all Americans to access retirement savings, with a specific focus on two: wage stagnation and the rise of independent workers.

Despite strong economic growth, workers in the bottom 60 percent of the income distribution have experienced minimal real wage growth for decades.[7] At the same time, the rise of a "gig economy" has fundamentally reshaped the labor market. Approximately 10 percent of the total workforce, or 16.5 million Americans, now rely on independent work as their primary or sole source of income—almost always without access to traditional employment relationships or workplace benefits.[8] At the Forum, participants confronted this question: How might the retirement system adapt so that all types of workers build meaningful retirement savings?

Savings Penalties for Low-Income Workers

There are also many low-income workers who face additional barriers to accessing retirement savings. Consider the dilemma facing more than 5 million low-income workers and workers with disabilities: save for the future, or retain access to essential public benefits.

Asset limits—many unchanged since the 1980s—can disqualify people from critical public programs like Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income if they accumulate as little as $2,000 in net worth, including the combined value of their car, bank, and retirement accounts. This outdated threshold hasn't been adjusted for inflation in four decades, and it penalizes those most in need for doing the financially responsible thing.[9]

Editors' Note

These asset limits, or "mobility blockers," came as a surprise to many Forum participants. Despite their deep expertise in the retirement field, few were aware of this arcane penalty—one that effectively shuts the door on retirement savings for millions of vulnerable Americans.[10]

By Aspen FSP's estimates, excluding retirement accounts from asset limit calculations in means-tested benefit programs could empower an additional 1 to 3 million low-income workers to participate and begin building long-term financial security, without jeopardizing their access to critical, present-day support.[11]

If we are to make universal access to all workers the top priority, it must be responsive to people's lived experiences and the ways in which distinct financial systems' rules can collide, unexpectedly getting in the way of the good financial decisions many workers want to make.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *Asset limits are such a 'yesterday' problem… and, it's really messing with people's financial lives today.*

The Pathways Toward Universal Access for Independent Workers

This year's conversation carried a new urgency—and at times, a genuine tension—as participants grappled with the best approaches to extend the retirement savings system to the remaining 56 million Americans without a workplace retirement plan, including America's 16 million independent workers.

Forum participants engaged in robust, even spirited, debate over the pathways toward universal access, with discussion focused on two specific policy proposals for coverage. The first works toward universal coverage by expanding state auto-IRA programs, while the second would create a Thrift Savings Plan (TSP)-like model as the "backstop" for employers who don't want to offer a private plan. These two approaches differ in design and cost but share key design elements and a common goal: ensuring that every worker has the opportunity to save.

In a marked shift from past discussions about approaches to universal access, both of these approaches include a mandate for employers to automatically enroll their employees into a retirement plan. The question has always been about whether and how to best support smaller employers. Small businesses, which employ about 47 percent of the private workforce, cite cost, administrative complexity, and capacity constraints as barriers. Further, nearly half of small businesses fail within their first five years.[12] A successful employer mandate must accommodate these realities through scaled requirements or simplified plan options.[13]

The following emerged from the discussion about two approaches to universal access:

1 State-Based Auto-IRA Plans

State auto-IRA programs have enrolled nearly one million new participants and accumulated $2 billion in assets across 17 states. This approach offers administrative flexibility, allowing states to develop their own program or partner with an existing program, as is the case of Colorado's management of Vermont, Maine, and Delaware programs. Further, states with auto-IRA programs and employer mandates often see positive spillover effects with increased voluntary retirement plan adoption among small employers.

However, auto-IRA programs have their limits. Typically structured as Roth IRAs, they cannot accept employer matches or the federal Saver's Match, and they do not currently have emergency savings account options. And in the absence of a federal policy, state auto-IRA programs have grown via organic state-by-state rollout, creating disparity between workers with similar jobs across different states.

2 Extending the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP)

The federal TSP serves about 7 million participants with remarkably low fees and plan features like auto-enrollment, matching contributions, portability, and straightforward investment options.[14] Extending TSP access would ensure that every American worker can access institutional-quality retirement savings options regardless of employer size or location, including gig workers.

Extending TSP could serve as either a primary retirement option or as a provider of last resort for workers whose employers do not offer plans. However, expanding the federal government's involvement raises questions about the government's role and could face resistance from private-sector providers. Further, Forum participants expressed concern that extending TSP—and enforcing a federal automatic enrollment mandate—is not yet a proven model, as compared to the early results of state-based auto-IRA plans.

Finding Common Ground

Despite different approaches, Forum participants identified shared ideals: **coverage completeness** ensuring no worker is left behind, **administrative efficiency** to minimize costs while maintaining quality, and **implementation flexibility** allowing different approaches to meet universal standards.

The most promising approach may combine elements of each, establishing federal standards while providing multiple pathways. Employers could meet requirements through traditional plans, state auto-IRA participation, or TSP enrollment, creating choice while ensuring comprehensive coverage. And in each path, employers would be required to auto-enroll their workers in retirement savings.

Editors' Note

This debate reflects the Forum's core purpose, serving as a space where the retirement savings community tests, refines, and strengthens competing ideas through sustained dialogue. The work ahead is to build consensus around which principles should guide that path forward—just as this group has already done over the past nine years in aligning around access as a top priority.

Save and Invest: Strengthen Retirement Plans' Wealth Accumulation Engine and Prevent Leakage

While access is foundational, successful participation remains the critical next step. Here, America's retirement savings system also remains unfinished. Approximately 23 million workers have access to but do not participate in a workplace retirement plan.[15] Research reveals a striking disconnect: 59 percent of non-participating eligible employees incorrectly believe they are currently saving for retirement.[16]

Conditions Shaping How Americans Save and Invest for Retirement

At this year's Forum, participants surfaced powerful, structural forces that are impacting how Americans can save and invest, influencing the extent to which people arrive at retirement age financially prepared. In particular, participants focused on capital markets' shift to private assets and the competing financial stresses of working-age households.

Private Markets Growth

A structural shift in American capitalism is underway as capital markets are moving from public to private. Since 1996, the number of public companies has dropped by 50 percent, while private markets have become the primary engine of wealth creation yet remain largely inaccessible to workplace retirement savers.[17] This transition is creating a two-tiered investment landscape that systematically disadvantages workers saving through traditional retirement accounts.

Forum participants asked: How might retirement portfolios evolve to offer all investors appropriate, diversified access to the full spectrum of America's wealth creation—not just the shrinking slice that's publicly traded?

Editors' Note

Access to private markets should not be a luxury good. In fact, those with the greatest retirement savings shortfalls—particularly low-income workers—stand to benefit the most from the stronger long-term returns private markets can provide. At the same time, these markets come with real risks, including limited transparency, higher fees, and liquidity constraints that must be carefully managed. Expanding access must be done thoughtfully, with safeguards in place to ensure products are appropriate, understandable, and in the best interest of all savers.

Competing Financial Stresses

The compounding pressures of housing costs, healthcare expenses, and childcare obligations create immediate financial strain that impedes retirement saving, especially for younger generations. These essential expenses have grown faster than inflation for decades, forcing difficult trade-offs between present needs and future financial security. Forum participants discussed: How might a retirement savings system acknowledge and accommodate these competing priorities while still enabling consistent long-term wealth accumulation?

> **OVERHEARD**
> *We can decide if we support parents. It's a terrible choice spending $100,000 on childcare for five years versus dropping out of the workforce.*

Proven Solutions for the Saving and Investing Gap

At this year's Forum, participants reflected on the solutions already underway to help more households save and invest consistently and avoid costly withdrawals from retirement accounts. Participants felt urgency to implement the Saver's Match effectively (due to take effect in 2027) as well as in maturing emergency savings solutions. A multitude of recent research has demonstrated the benefit of emergency savings on both short- and long-term financial security. Participants also echoed previous years' conversations in calling for auto-portability and auto re-enrollment as standard account features.

Saver's Match

The evolution of the Saver's Credit into the Saver's Match in 2027 represents a meaningful opportunity to boost retirement savings among low-income workers. The new Saver's Match will provide a direct 50 percent match on contributions up to $1,000 annually for workers earning below specific income thresholds. This policy has the potential to benefit up to 69 million workers.[18]

Yet this opportunity also brings urgency. Implementation challenges loom large. The program must create infrastructure linking tax filings with deposited matches, resolve incompatibilities with Roth IRAs used by most state auto-IRA plans, and manage account transitions when workers change jobs. Preparedness for the 2027 launch date will be critical to ensure that all eligible workers receive the benefit.

Editors' Note

This year's Forum marked a turning point as the Saver's Match focus shifted from policy design to practical delivery—with high stakes for getting it right. With the clock ticking toward 2027, participants acknowledged shared responsibility, as many in the room are directly implicated in bringing the Saver's Match to life. While the broader retirement ecosystem may not yet feel the pressure, many Forum participants clearly do.

Emergency-Savings Linked Accounts

"Let 1,000 flowers bloom." In previous years, that was the stance that many Forum participants had on emergency savings. But this year marked a distinct shift in favor of giving a few solutions time to take root.

Why emergency savings matters to low-income workers is no longer in question. Longitudinal research demonstrates the direct link between short- and long-term financial security. Employees with emergency savings are 70 percent more likely to contribute to retirement plans, while those without adequate emergency funds are 13 times more likely to take costly hardship withdrawals.[19, 20] Just $1,000 in emergency savings can cut the likelihood of early withdrawals in half.[21, 22]

The task now is how best to deliver these solutions at scale. While SECURE 2.0 enabled automatic enrollment into in-plan emergency savings (i.e., PLESAs or Pension-Linked Emergency Savings Accounts), these emerging accounts would only be available to those who already have access to workplace retirement plans. For the millions of workers without access to such plans, the question is: what else can work?

Participants explored a range of possibilities—including out-of-plan models—with a growing consensus that a short list of models should be nurtured and that policymakers should prioritize enabling automatic enrollment for all of these models. The goal is not to pick a single path, but to ensure that every worker, regardless of job type or employer, can access opt-out emergency savings tools that stabilize the present and protect long-term financial security.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *Short-term savings and long-term savings are not enemies, they're friends.*

Auto-Portability and Auto-Re-Enrollment as Standard Account Features

America's increasingly mobile workforce has outgrown the retirement system's original design. Today's workers hold, on average, more than 12 jobs over their careers, and service workers switch roles even more frequently, about every two years.[23, 24] Yet the retirement system still struggles to follow them from job to job.

Each transition creates friction. Many workers—especially low-income workers—cash out small balances when changing employers, sacrificing long-term gains and incurring taxes and penalties. Even those who preserve their savings face erosion from fees spread across multiple small accounts—something we dubbed "The $1,000 Problem" at the 2024 Forum.[25]

> **OVERHEARD**
> *Portability is about keeping people engaged with their money—getting to a place where they see these funds as a long-term investment versus a windfall to spend.*

Auto-portability offers a promising solution. Until now, most efforts have focused on automatically transferring account balances when workers change jobs—particularly small accounts, which are most at risk of being cashed out. This simple step helps preserve savings, sustain investment growth, and reduce premature withdrawals. But what if we were to reframe the solution? Then it's not just about moving money—it's about moving the whole account, as some have suggested.[26] That includes a worker's settings, portfolio selections, and default investment options. Automatically transferring these elements alongside the balance could help workers maintain consistency in their savings journey and avoid costly disruptions.

Lastly, Forum participants echoed previous years' discussions in calling for auto-re-enrollment as a standard account feature, highlighting that one-time account sign-ups treat retirement decisions as static when workers' lives are inherently dynamic. Periodic auto-re-enrollment addresses this by prompting workers who previously opted out to reconsider at regular intervals. Financial circumstances change, priorities change, and salaries increase over time. Workplaces should also be dynamic, automatically resurfacing retirement enrollment as an employee benefit.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *We ask people to opt into their health insurance plan every year, but we don't ask workers the same who opt out of retirement accounts.*

What's Next? Greater Diversification and Investment Options

Forum participants concluded the discussions on 'Save and Invest' with a call to rethink in-plan portfolio options for the retirement plans of the future. As wealth creation increasingly shifts from public to private capital markets, retirement investors limited to publicly traded securities risk missing substantial segments of growth.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *Superfunds in Australia allocate 30-40 percent to private markets. When you get a large enough fund, you can manage the risk effectively and balance liquidity or growth depending on the time horizon.*

Some participants believed that retirement plan investment options could be expanded to include a more diverse range of asset classes—including private equity, alternative investments, real assets, and other historically institutional-only investments—while maintaining appropriate diversification and risk management. Savers can thereby capture returns from the full spectrum of America's economic performance. This is especially important given the financial stresses that working-age households face that compete for retirement savings; participants agreed that we must ensure long-term retirement portfolio returns remain robust. Other participants took a more conservative approach to the idea of including private assets in retirement plan investment menus or target date funds, citing concerns about higher volatility, more expensive management fees, and restricted liquidity as compared to public markets.

Retire: Ensure Sufficient Income for Retirement

Retirement is not a single decision—it's a phase of life that requires a series of complex, interconnected choices. Retirees must navigate three simultaneous questions: Will they continue doing any paid work? When should they claim Social Security? And how should they draw down their savings? The catch: No one knows how long they'll live, how the markets will perform, or what their expenses will be.

The insight of the day? That a conversation about "retirement income" alone isn't enough. What we need are solutions that address net retirement income. We need to take a holistic view of household finances: the income and the expenses.

Going forward, the work will be about building up the full stack of income solutions for low-wealth retirees while simultaneously pushing down on the expense stack. And that requires a better understanding of what goes—or what could go—in either column and the systemic forces that shape them.

Conditions Shaping Retire

Participants surfaced powerful forces that are impacting the retirement financial experience for current retirees as well as the next generation of American workers. In particular, participants focused on demographic transition.

Demographic Transition

America faces a new demographic reality. Not only are people living longer, but birth rates are also declining. Without immigration, the U.S. population is projected to begin shrinking within the next decade.[27] This shift toward fewer workers and more retirees carries profound implications for economic growth, productivity, and the social fabric that supports aging populations.

Forum participants grappled with this question: How must retirement systems adapt to a future defined by longer lives, fewer workers, and different family structures?

Editors' Note

These shifts will be felt most acutely by low-income families, who are less likely to benefit from the longevity dividend and are less likely to have private savings or intergenerational wealth to rely on—placing even greater pressure on public programs and safety nets. And at the same time, these programs will, themselves, be impacted by demographic trends such as falling birth rates.

Pathways to Protecting Retirement Income

The path forward will require a shift in focus from products to people, so that we can look comprehensively across the full stack of retirement income sources—from Social Security and annuities to bridge strategies, managed withdrawals, and even longevity pooling solutions like tontines. We have only scratched the surface on what should be the full menu of solutions.

Critically, these solutions must center the realities of low-wealth retirees, as well as their preferences and goals. For example, we often assume that low-wealth retirees have no bequest motive. But do we know that to be the case? Ensuring that every worker has a fair shot at turning their savings into stable, lasting income starts with a person-centered approach.

Protecting Social Security

Social Security remains the bedrock of retirement security, particularly for low-income workers and those without access to workplace retirement plans. But for younger generations, growing uncertainty about the program's future is eroding confidence and complicating long-term financial planning.

Public support for the program is strong; 85 percent of Americans favor maintaining or increasing benefit levels, even if it requires higher taxes.[28] The political foundation to strengthen Social Security is there, and Americans have signaled they're willing to make the hard tradeoffs. The question is whether policymakers can do the same.

The Social Security Administration also needs the capacity to serve the public effectively. Adequate staffing and accessible customer service are essential for ensuring that benefits are administered clearly, accurately, and on time.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *Young people want clarity that Social Security is going to stay there. We're in a gray zone today where people aren't sure it will be.*

In-Plan Lifetime Income and Longevity Risk Protection

Today just 7 percent of retirees have access to the full "retirement income trifecta": Social Security, a defined benefit pension, and a defined contribution plan.[29] For the vast majority, retirement income planning falls squarely on their shoulders, requiring them to figure out how to spend, but not outlive, their savings.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *The lack of long-term care and the financial ability to access it as people age is a market failure.*

Demographic shifts toward longer lifespans mean more older Americans face the potential of extended care costs late in life. While retirement income represents the foundational layer of longevity protection, retirement savings should also address the care costs that current planning leaves largely unaddressed. Long-term care expenses—potentially catastrophic for individual savers—could be managed through the same risk-pooling mechanisms that make retirement income products like annuities viable.

Integrating long-term care insurance directly into retirement plan structures, for example, would create comprehensive longevity protection across larger populations that addresses both income needs and affordable care costs. Such integration would address what many experts identify as a substantial market failure—the absence of affordable, accessible protection against potentially catastrophic late-life care expenses.

OVERHEARD

Every defined contribution system is struggling with converting assets to lifetime income.

Annuities offer another potential path forward, managed withdrawals yet another. But what stood out to Forum participants was that most existing solutions were not designed with low-income workers in mind. Lifetime income products can provide valuable security, but they also raise concerns about equity. Low-income workers, who tend to have lower life expectancies, may receive less value from these products than their higher-income counterparts.

Managing an Unexpected Expense: Vulnerability to Fraud and Scams

When thinking about the major expenses retirees face, healthcare, long-term care, and housing likely jump to mind. But there's a growing expense shock on the horizon that we dug into this year: fraud and scams. Though lesser-known, the impact is steep, as Americans lost an estimated $158 billion to fraud and scams last year, with older Americans disproportionately targeted.[30] The increasing sophistication of fraud schemes, accelerated by AI and technology, puts decades of retirement savings at risk precisely when Americans are most vulnerable to cognitive changes. Forum participants were struck by just how sweeping and systemic this issue has become. The discussion turned to a pressing question: How might retirement savings systems incorporate structural protections for fraud, scams, and cognitive decline—while maintaining people's dignity, autonomy, and control over their financial decisions?

> **OVERHEARD**
> *Fraud is a huge problem and growing. It's hard to measure because a lot of people are embarrassed. The amounts they are losing are becoming higher and higher.*

Editors' Note

A key Forum insight revealed that asset managers and recordkeepers—who manage the massive pools of retirement wealth that scammers increasingly target—have remained largely on the periphery of fraud prevention efforts. Retirement accounts could incorporate both technological and structural protections against cognitive decline and fraud vulnerabilities, with asset managers playing a more central, protective role. This could include early-warning monitoring systems that detect unusual spending patterns, trusted contact protocols, view-only access options for designated family members, tiered approval requirements for large withdrawals, and specialized education on fraud prevention.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *In the six years before diagnosis of dementia, people lose half their net worth and their credit scores tank. They become more susceptible to fraud. Tech and financial services have a key role to play here; we need more tools, like bubble wrapping, trusted contacts, and view-only access, that protect people.*

Big Ideas for the Future of Retirement Savings

Two big ideas emerged from this year's Forum that span all three stages of retirement savings. First, early wealth building accounts can help all Americans start to save earlier and harness additional decades of compounding that can dramatically improve retirement outcomes even with modest initial investments. And second, blockchain-enabled infrastructure could substantially streamline recordkeeping and facilitate lifetime portability of accounts.

1 Big Idea: Early Wealth Building Accounts

The cost of a secure and dignified retirement continues to climb. By some estimates, babies born today will need more than $2 million to retire.[31] Rather than beginning retirement preparation when entering the workforce in one's 20s, early wealth building accounts enable investing from birth, benefitting from two additional decades of compound growth. Such accounts could dramatically increase lifetime savings, alleviating risks from demographic shifts, wage pressures, or future returns.[32, 33]

> **OVERHEARD**
> *It's never too early to start investing. Give $150 to someone born today and it will grow to $100,000 by the age of 70.*

2 Big Idea: Blockchain-Enabled Account Infrastructure

With workers increasingly mobile across multiple employers and independent work, next-generation, blockchain-enabled record-keeping infrastructure could create truly portable, universally accessible retirement accounts and records that follow workers seamlessly throughout their lives. This technology could eliminate the friction that causes workers to lose track of, or to cash out, small balances as they move across employers or independent contracts, while also reducing administrative costs.

> **OVERHEARD**
> *On-chain asset management means access 24/7, no gatekeepers. There's a new investment world where power isn't fully centralized. Younger people have totally different views and experiences of investing.*

Conclusion

By the close of the 2025 Aspen Leadership Forum on Retirement Savings, one thing was clear: The most urgent challenges ahead don't exist in isolation—they collide. And when they do, the effects are amplified.

Demographic shifts are changing the shape of the workforce just as wealth creation is moving away from public markets. As portfolios anchored in public equities face structural headwinds, future retirees may not only need new approaches to investing but also to caregiving and legacy planning, especially as family structures evolve. At the same time, wage stagnation and rising costs of housing, family care, and health care are eating into the very income that might otherwise be saved.

Forum participants were clear-eyed about these challenges—and equally clear-eyed about what's needed to meet them. Start earlier. Diversify portfolios. Pool risk in new ways. And, most of all: upgrade the system itself to ensure that every person in America has the opportunity to save and invest successfully for their future.

As we approach the Forum's 10th anniversary, the "job to do" has shifted. Some aspects of our retirement system are ready for change. We know what to do; now is the time to test and learn what really works for low-income workers. Other aspects require more vision. Forum participants were united in the belief that solving both aspects is both possible and necessary.

The convening ended with a strong sense of realistic optimism and a sharper understanding that we get to choose what comes next.

Let's choose to build a system that works for everyone.

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