

# COMMUNITY WORK SERVICES

## AT YOUR SERVICE



### **Partnership Members:**

Community Work Services, Massachusetts Lodging Association Education Foundation,  
Boston Area Hotels

BayStateWorks Promising Practice Case Study

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-S. Nicholas Kriketos II  
Director of Guest Services at the Ritz-Carlton

## 1 The Need

People who are homeless face numerous barriers to entering or re-entering the workforce. They often lack resources that are essential for successfully obtaining and retaining employment, such as stable living situations, appropriate attire, personal identification documents, references, and transportation. Employers are often misinformed about individuals who are homeless, assuming that they have issues with substance abuse, lack motivation and have little to contribute.

Individuals who are homeless and faced with an immediate need for income may view job-training and educational programs, especially those which are unpaid, as excessively time-consuming. Instead of completing a program, they may drop out to pursue dead-end jobs or find other ways to support themselves. This population needs to work in an industry that does not require extensive levels of training or education, but offers its employees strong wages and opportunities to learn on the job. Community Work Services' (CWS) staff believe that with outreach and education, Boston’s thriving hotel industry could offer individuals who are homeless numerous opportunities for employment, growth and advancement.

## 2 The Solution

This case study will examine the efforts of CWS to engage Boston’s lodging industry in the job training, employment and retention of individuals who are homeless. CWS’ effort, the “At Your Service” (AYS) program, has several components: an eight-week job training program utilizing a curriculum designed by the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA); outreach to Boston-area hotels through a partnership with the Massachusetts Lodging Association Education Foundation (MLAEF); and a business advisory committee comprised of hiring managers, human resources professionals, and others from Boston-area hotels.

The following were the proposed goals for this project:

- Sixty (60) participants will enroll in At Your Service.
- Forty (40) participants will be placed in employment.
- Participants will earn an average of \$8.25 per hour with benefits for working 32 hours or more.

- Seventy percent (70%) of those employed will still be working at twelve months post-placement.

## **3 Implementation**

### **3.1 Training**

Through a partnership with the Massachusetts Lodging Association Education Foundation, the AYS program staff was able to access the Skills Tasks and Results Training (START) curriculum developed by the American Hotel & Lodging Association. The START curriculum prepares learners for eighteen different jobs in the lodging industry. It was determined that the training would be offered in eight-week “open-entry/open-exit” cycles with 30 hours of training per week. Individuals would also be required to achieve a minimum of sixth-grade reading comprehension on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Use of an academic screening test and a formal curriculum is a significant departure from Community Work Services’ traditional programs for individuals who are homeless. Since 1997, CWS had been offering paid, on-the-job training in food service and janitorial work. These programs had been fairly successful in helping participants to obtain entry-level service jobs.

To connect with potential candidates for AYS, CWS conducted a series of mailings and recruitment activities targeted at local homeless shelters. Within months of program initiation, program leaders experienced several obstacles, including low enrollment rates and a significant drop-out rate during the first two weeks of training. This was surprising to CWS staff because the agency always had a waitlist for services.

To examine the issue of low enrollment rates, AYS program staff reviewed outreach records and TABE scores. The data indicated that the program had recruited enough individuals to fulfill enrollment projections, but that those recruited were not passing the TABE. Participants in the program were interviewed about their experiences with the TABE. The interviews revealed that people found it “difficult” and “confusing,” and that many thought that they would perform better than they actually did. Staff also found that the TABE was very labor-intensive. After looking at other available reading comprehension tests, AYS program leaders selected the Reading and Arithmetic Indexes (RAI) for its ease of administration. Subsequent participants remarked that the RAI “was less intimidating.”

For individuals who scored under sixth-grade level, but showed great motivation and interest (attending all their pre-enrollment appointments), CWS implemented a two-week trial period: participants could enter training and training staff and case managers would evaluate whether or not they could keep up with the classroom material. CWS thought that this was a good practice because it provided opportunities to otherwise qualified people who have difficulty with standardized tests. Those who were unsuccessful during the trial period or who scored very low on the RAI would be referred to one of CWS’ other programs. In working with the hotels more closely, it became clear that one does not need sixth-grade reading ability to perform most “back-of-the-house” hotel jobs. Despite this, after several individuals were unsuccessful during their trial periods, it was determined that those who score under sixth-grade reading level would have difficulty with the written materials and quizzes of the START curriculum.

Looking at the drop-out rate, it appeared that many individuals were terminated or suspended from the program due to issues related to attendance and punctuality. Program staff determined that some of this problem was caused by conflicts with shelter requirements. AYS program schedules were rigorous and did not allow much time for individuals to take care of other life matters during the week (e.g. therapy appointments, AA, housing search, etc.). This was especially problematic for those who were living in shelters that required residents to return each day at a certain time or risk losing their bed.

To address this issue, AYS program leaders decided to have case managers take a more active role in monitoring issues that may have been affecting an individual's ability to participate. On a case-by-case basis, case managers would also be able help program staff exercise some discretion with attendance policies. AYS program leaders also decided that a morning or afternoon each week should be built into the program schedule specifically for individuals to attend to personal matters.

AYS staff also contacted individuals who had left the program to determine why they left. The majority of individuals whom staff were able to contact indicated that they had left the program because they needed money. They said they were unable to pay for transportation to the program and/or lunch or other necessities while in the program. To respond to this need, CWS implemented a bus token program and gave selected participants vouchers for meals in the CWS cafeteria. These resources were used as needed at the discretion of case managers.

These program adjustments had an impact on program enrollments. About nine months after the beginning of implementation, the program's class size had more than doubled from the start (average of four participants up to an average eight to twelve participants). Today, AYS leaders are also looking at the possibility of implementing stipends for participation in training, pending identification of additional resources. The AYS program has recently received funding for post-placement retention incentives.

### **3.2 Outreach to Employers**

AYS program leaders knew that employer involvement would be critical to meeting program objectives and ensuring that participants would be successful in transitioning to work. In partnership with MLAEF, which promotes workforce development for Boston-area hotels, CWS developed an outreach strategy.

First of all, it was decided that CWS would formalize a partnership with MLAEF through a subcontract to the association to conduct outreach to hotels on behalf of AYS: an MLAEF staff person would devote sixteen hours per month to connecting with area hotels and promoting the project. This would include attending industry events, introducing the curriculum, educating hiring managers about the target populations and informing CWS staff about job openings and other relevant industry information.

To get started, the MLAEF staff person and CWS' Placement Specialist devised a PowerPoint presentation that outlined the START curriculum components and the benefits of working with AYS. This presentation outlined how the program could lower costs associated with recruitment, up-front training and turnover and help diversify hotels' workplaces. The

presentation was conducted in a variety of industry forums, including a monthly meeting of lodging industry human resource professionals conducted by the Massachusetts Lodging Association.

As a second step, the MLAEF staff person and CWS' Placement Specialist met with numerous human resource professionals at individual hotels to gain a greater understanding of their hiring needs, hiring processes, and the unique cultures and languages that make up the hotel industry (e.g. hotels call themselves "properties;" staff are often referred to as "associates," "team members" or "cast members.").

The program was well-received by area hotels. Hotel representatives admit that their initial desire to become involved in the AYS program was primarily motivated by their high turnover rates. Nevertheless, some properties (hotels) expressed apprehension about the target population and recalled some previous unsatisfactory experiences in working with other human service providers. To gain the confidence of these hotels, AYS dedicated one staff person to serve as the point of contact to address any concerns or mediate any issues that arose. This person would be responsible for triaging concerns and working with the team at CWS to get them addressed. The hotels also responded favorably to the program because the START curriculum was developed by their industry and endorsed by MLAEF. Over time, with successful placements and program results, the program's rapport with the hotels has grown considerably. As placements have been made, more and more hotels have become interested in working with the project. The employers at the table have become the salespeople for AYS.

### **3.3 Advisory Committee**

The Advisory Committee has been a pivotal component of AYS. Following the initial outreach to the hotels, the following hotels joined the advisory committee: Holiday Inn Express, Shawmut Inn, Onyx Hotel, Bulfinch Hotel, Ritz Carlton, Hampton Inn and Suites, Best Western, Park Plaza, Royal Sonesta and The Westin. These employers agreed at a minimum to interview, and potentially hire, graduates from AYS. Committee members also agreed to participate in the following activities:

- providing feedback on the program curriculum;
- providing personnel to conduct work-readiness seminars and present on topics relevant in hotel industry careers (e.g. career paths,, expectations on the job);
- sponsoring job-shadowing opportunities;
- mock interviews to prepare participants to conduct their job search;
- project evaluation activities, including completing evaluations and satisfaction surveys;
- collecting wage and retention data;
- providing feedback on graduate/employees on-the-job performance;
- and monitoring retention issues and promoting advancement.

At first, attendance for the Advisory Committee fluctuated depending on the time of year, but slowly the group solidified over time. The AYS Advisory Committee started with many members, which was challenging to manage especially when the enrollments were low. There were a lot of employers at the table who were enthusiastic about hiring, but not enough program

participants entering and completing the program to meet their needs. It was challenging to manage these expectations. The difficulties of this early phase may have led some participants to leave the advisory committee, but with their departure, the group became more focused and manageable in size (six to eight participants).

Today the individuals most dedicated to AYS are those who have had successful hires through the program. This core group is very engaged in the program and often sponsors mock interviews, tours and job shadowing activities for program participants. The AYS class attends weekly tours and shadowing activities. The advisory committee is now focused on the future of AYS and tackling issues such as continued funding, restructuring the training to include time for internships, formalizing internships and working to increase retention for program graduates placed at hotels.

## 4 Results

AYS is now diligently working towards its goals with varying degrees of success and, at times, unexpected results. The program has achieved the following:

- served 58 individuals out of a projected 60 (96% of projected goal);
- and placed 38 individuals out of a projected 40 (95% of projected goal).

Placements have occurred at the following hotels: Bulfinch Hotel, Radisson, Ritz Carlton, Doubletree, Bayside, Park Plaza, Hampton Inn and Suites, Hyatt Regency, Hilton Boston, Langham Hotel, Wyndham, Charles Hotel, and Boston Harbor Hotel. Though many of these represent single placements, certain properties have hired more than three graduates.

Promoting job retention continues to be an issue. AYS program staff have found that even those participants who have successfully completed the training and transitioned to work still struggle with many stability issues. Supervisors indicated that some AYS graduates have had difficulty with managing their often-changing work schedules. Some also appear to lack confidence and require some “hand-holding.” To date, AYS has achieved the following retention benchmarks:

- seventeen AYS graduates placed have completed 90 days on the job;
- eight AYS graduates placed have completed six months on the job;
- and five AYS graduates placed have reached or are approaching their one-year anniversary on the job.

To further promote job retention for AYS graduates and other homeless individuals served by CWS, with funding through The Boston Foundation, CWS has implemented Project Support. This post-placement program focuses on problem-solving through peer mentoring. The program also offers incentives for achieving retention benchmarks. CWS staff anticipate that these services will strengthen job retention for AYS graduates.

Unexpectedly, AYS staff placed some individuals in much higher level jobs than originally anticipated. It was initially thought that the majority of program graduates would be placed in “back of the house” positions, such as housekeeping, food service and maintenance jobs. Instead, based on their previous work experiences and encouragement from hotel HR staff, some

AYS graduates have been placed as doormen, housemen, bellmen, drivers, reservationists and one graduate was placed as a club-level concierge at a very exclusive Boston-area hotel. Not only were these positions much higher and more visible than anticipated, but the entry-level wages were also much higher than expected. AYS program staff had projected having an average wage of \$8.25 per hour. Today the average wage at placement is \$12 per hour before additional tips.

The program leaders have found Boston's hotel industry to be enthusiastic about AYS and welcoming to the homeless population. The hotel industry has a strong commitment to their employees, incumbent worker training and promoting from within. The hotels also have been open about discussing and working through Criminal Offender Record Investigations (CORI) and credit issues. These attributes of the hotel industry make it a good match for individuals who are homeless and have had legal issues, sporadic work histories and/or did not finish high school or college. Most hotels also have well-articulated corporate responsibility programs, which encourage their employees to get involved with community organizations and charities.

AYS has been an exciting project and, though there have been some speed bumps along the way, the program has been warmly embraced by Boston-area hotels. The following are some of the things that the program's hotel partners have had to say about AYS and its graduates:

S. Nicholas Kriketos II, Director of Guest Services at the Ritz-Carlton, called the AYS graduates hired by the hotel "true service professionals." He added, "The ladies and gentlemen we have selected from CWS have met and exceeded all of our expectations...Finding quality ladies and gentlemen to work for our company is a challenge, but the level of people that CWS has sent us has been incredible. The staff at CWS truly understands the Ritz-Carlton's service culture and has gone above and beyond the call of duty when finding candidates to fill positions."

Marta Reus, Assistant Human Resources Director at the Fairmont Copley Plaza, stated that the three AYS graduates hired by the hotel have been excellent additions to the staff. "They are aware of the industry and our expectations," she said. "They are well prepared for a job with us. They understand the service aspect of hospitality and have a good feel for the atmosphere and service level we provide."

AYS program leaders report feeling the support and enthusiasm for the program growing each day. Through the American Hotel & Lodging Association and its national publications, AYS and its work with Boston hotels are currently being promoted as a model for other areas to replicate. Jeff Gerber of the American Hotel & Lodging Education Institute recently remarked: "I feel the Community Work Services' program could be a model for other agencies throughout the country that work with homeless populations...They have built excellent partnerships with industry, match the right students with the program, do an outstanding job of instructing the course, and most importantly, place the graduates into good jobs."

Over the past year, CWS has been providing assistance to agencies in Connecticut and Colorado on how to start their own programs to train people for the lodging industry. CWS was recently informed that the agency in Connecticut has received funding to implement their version of the AYS program in the fall of 2006.

## 5 Lessons

CWS learned many lessons when implementing AYS. First of all, when targeting a very challenging population to serve, such as the homeless population, build some flexibility into the program. The agency initially had some very strict policies that caused staff to lose some program participants, who, with the right supports and case management, may have been ultimately successful. Instead of terminating them from services, CWS also should have referred them to other services. Program leaders look back on this quite reluctantly and regret that they so quickly shut the door on individuals who have not have had many open to them.

Similarly, at the beginning of a new program, monitor everything, and closely. When a problem arises, be prepared to make changes quickly. AYS leaders waited too long to investigate the issue of drop-outs and to adjust the testing procedures. Apparently program leaders did not provide enough guidance to program staff regarding the “pilot” nature of the program, and the assumption that changes could and would be made to it. Program staff thought that because CWS had articulated in the original proposal that the program would use the TABE, that AYS staff were bound to using that tool, as well as to strictly enforcing stated attendance policies. Ultimately, the program wasted time and lost participants and employers on the Advisory Committee.

Finally, when engaging an industry like the hotels, start slowly and small. Do your homework. AYS started the program by casting a large net. The program got lots of hotels (more than fifteen) excited about the program, but then was not able to keep them engaged since the program's scope was insufficient to meet their immediate needs. AYS program leaders also discovered that, although they are in the same industry and some hotels may have the same name or parent company, each hotel has very different hiring practices and culture. It took time to meet with each hotel partner and gain understanding of these differences. Culture is crucial to hotels; it is very important to know what makes the Ritz Carlton, the Ritz Carlton, and what makes it different from every other hotel.

## Appendix A: Article Featuring AYS



### **Boston Workforce Development Program Puts Homeless to Work in Hotels**

By Elizabeth Johnson  
American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute

Boston's growing hotel industry has a new source for qualified line-level workers, thanks to the collaborative efforts of a state hotel association, a community service agency, and area hotels. The "At Your Service" program is training formerly homeless and other economically disadvantaged clients to become successful hotel employees at leading Boston properties that include the Ritz-Carlton, Fairmont Copley Plaza, and the Bulfinch Hotel.

The program, which recently completed its first year, grew out of a meeting between representatives of the Massachusetts Lodging Association Education Foundation, Inc. and Community Work Services during a workshop on workforce training funding.

"We talked, and it seemed like the perfect match," said Deborah Andrews, executive director of the foundation. "I knew we needed a vehicle for offering entry-level training for hotels, and CWS offered high-quality training programs for the homeless and people with disabilities. I knew they would be a wonderful partner."

Andrews met with general managers and human resources personnel from Boston-area hotels to learn more about their needs for line-level workers and to solicit their participation in developing a program that would meet their requirements as well as meeting the needs of those being trained.

The MLA Education Foundation Inc. (Foundation) and Community Work Services also consulted with Jeff Gerber, director of workforce development for the American Hotel & Lodging Association Educational Institute, to develop the "At Your Service" program. The

program uses EI's Skills, Tasks, and Results Training (START) workforce development curriculum, which offers training and certification for 12 line-level hotel positions.

START, which began in October 2003, is used by Job Corps, Goodwill Industries, the Urban League, and other community and faith-based organizations in 21 states and the District of Columbia to help their clients prepare for long-term careers leading to self-sufficiency.

"The START curriculum is very concise and includes preparation for many different positions, which enables us to offer our clients a choice of jobs they may be interested in," explained Serena Powell, executive director of Community Work Services. "We represent people with a diverse set of challenges and barriers. Some are homeless and college educated, while others are homeless and learning disabled. START offers a range of jobs to meet different ability levels."

Powell added that the program's structure, testing component, and AH&LA credential were other important considerations.

"It was an easy sell to the hotels—we got a resounding 'Yes!' when we presented the program to them," she said. Participating properties include the Bulfinch Hotel, Hampton Inn & Suites, Holiday Inn Express, Park Plaza, Ritz Carlton, Royal Sonesta, Shawmut Inn, Fairmont Copley Plaza, and the Westin.

Because local hotel executives serve on the program's advisory committee, they have a vested interest in the program's success. General managers come in and talk to classes about careers in the lodging industry, about their properties' corporate culture and their expectations for employees, and about how their hotels function. They give hotel tours to students, provide job shadowing opportunities, and even act as on-site "labs" for students' practical training.

"The hotels have been very generous and involved," said Powell. "For instance, the Bulfinch Hotel, which is literally at our back door, lets us bring students over to clean their rooms for practice and to use their laundry facilities."

Len Hartwell, general manager of the Bulfinch, noted that his hotel's participation benefits the property as much as it does the students in the At Your Service program.

"We at the Bulfinch Hotel are committed to working with At Your Service to ensure a solidly-based community relationship that will be mutually beneficial to all parties involved," he said. "We have employed a couple of people who have graduated from the program and they have been very well prepared for the job."

At Your Service is an eight-week program that offers intensive skills training in areas such as housekeeping, front desk, reservations, bell services, maintenance, restaurant server, banquet employee, and bus person. In addition to classroom instruction, CWS provides support services including case management, job readiness training, mentoring, job placement, and follow-up services for up to a year after job placement.

The program has a rolling admission; students can begin at any point in the program and continue until they have completed the curriculum.

“Our clients are struggling with a lot of barriers; the day they walk through the door is the day they are ready to receive services. We want to keep their momentum going, so we don’t want them to have to wait until we start another session,” Powell explained. She added that CWS helps its clients to overcome other barriers by assisting with transportation costs and working with the welfare department to pay for childcare expenses while participants are in the training program.

As clients are ready to graduate, CWS works closely with area hotels to carefully match prospective employees with appropriate job placements. Powell and her staff take the time to learn about each property’s culture so that the candidates they present are a good fit for the hotel.

S. Nicholas Kriketos II, director of guest services at the Ritz-Carlton, called the At Your Service graduates hired by the hotel “true service professionals.”

“The ladies and gentlemen we have selected from Community Work Services have met and exceeded all of our expectations,” he said. “Finding quality ladies and gentlemen to work for our company is a challenge, but the level of people that CWS has sent us has been incredible. The staff at CWS truly understands the Ritz-Carlton’s service culture and has gone above and beyond the call of duty when finding candidates to fill positions.”

Marta Reus, assistant human resources director at the Fairmont Copley Plaza, stated that the three At Your Service graduates hired by the hotel have been excellent additions to the staff.

“They are aware of the industry and our expectations,” she said. “They are well prepared for a job with us. They understand the service aspect of hospitality and have a good feel for the atmosphere and service level we provide.”

She added that the new employees come to the hotel with knowledge of the hospitality business and its demands. Even more than the technical knowledge of a particular position, the

understanding of the demands of hospitality is a key factor in the success of At Your Service graduates as hotel employees.

Andrea Mitsch, benefits manager at the Fairmont Copley Plaza, noted that one of the biggest barriers to successful employment in the hospitality industry is finding employees who understand that hospitality is 24/7, and not a 9-to-5 job. She explained that the At Your Service program stresses that idea constantly. Students learn that working in hospitality can mean days, nights, weekends, and holidays.

“It’s definitely an asset to employers to hire someone who already ‘gets it’ and knows what’s involved in the job,” said Mitsch. “In fact, it benefits both the hotel and the employee. They know right from the start what they can expect.”

Deborah Andrews is proud of what the Foundation has accomplished in its partnership with Community Work Services. She spoke movingly of the success of the At Your Service program and its graduates.

“We have people working at hotels all over the city. One woman had been working two fast-food jobs. After completing the program, she got a full-time job at the Radisson, had benefits for the first time, and was making \$6,000 a year more than she did from her other two jobs combined,” said Andrews.

“These are employees that we want to keep,” she added. “They are dedicated and they have made a commitment to the lodging industry. You have to give them credit for the hard work they’ve done. These are people who have the potential to become some of the best employees.”

Andrews said workforce development programs like At Your Service benefit hotels by providing them with highly-skilled, cross-trained, entry-level employees, while reducing costs associated with recruitment, upfront training, and employee turnover.

“Hotels are going to save \$1,000 to \$3,000 in training per employee,” she stated. “They are going to be hiring people who have been through a quality Educational Institute program that is internationally recognized. They are going to have input into the training of their future employees. And they will be offering jobs to people who are ready to work and who want to succeed. Everyone wins.”

EI’s Jeff Gerber, who has helped to establish more than 65 workforce development programs using the START curriculum, had nothing but praise for the At Your Service program.

“I feel the Community Work Services START program could be a model for other agencies throughout the country that work with homeless populations,” he said. “They have built excellent partnerships with industry, match the right students with the program, do an outstanding job of instructing the course, and most importantly, place the graduates into good jobs.”

Based on the success of the Boston program, Andrews hopes to introduce the concept into other areas of the state, such as Springfield. She also encouraged other state hotel associations to look into partnerships with community training organizations and workforce development programs.

“This is something our industry needs,” she said. “We just have to work together to make it happen.”

*For information on how your organization can develop a hospitality-focused workforce development program using the START curriculum, contact Jeff Gerber, Director of Workforce Development, at 407-999-8103 or [jgerber@ahla.com](mailto:jgerber@ahla.com).*