

# Sustainable Employment: No Shortcuts to Living Wage Jobs

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## Report Focus Paths to Sustainable Employment

### Introduction

In a recent study for the United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Commonwealth Corporation researchers found that helping people move from low-paying to living wage jobs requires long-term strategies for advancement. Employment and training programs for low-skilled, low-wage workers tend to be geared toward entry-level jobs and rarely provide support for advancement to sustainable employment. To achieve that goal, career development and a variety of support services should be made available for the long term.

### Background

In the spring of 2005, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay commissioned Commonwealth Corporation (CommCorp) to investigate career-focused models for sustainable employment. The purpose of the project was to help expand the United Way's understanding of integrated service models, combining basic skills education (including English language and math) with occupational training, employability skills, and supportive services.

CommCorp approached the project first by reviewing the literature on the subject and then studying ten United Way affiliated organizations to learn about the employment-related services they provide. Toward the end of the project, CommCorp hosted a group discussion with representatives from the ten organizations to probe more deeply into

the question of how low-income workers can be helped to achieve family-sustaining employment.

This research brief summarizes what we learned in our research.

### What do the experts say?

The United Way asked CommCorp to review the literature with an eye toward answering the following question:

*What service models are successful in moving people rapidly toward sustainable employment?*

Our first task was to define precisely what is meant by some of these terms. Since no clear measure for "sustainable employment" applied to the many different studies under review, we decided to apply the same assessment rubric that is being used by the United Way: the Massachusetts Family Self-Sufficiency Scales and Ladders Assessment Tool,<sup>1</sup> developed by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development. This rubric gives guidelines for classing individuals into five categories: in crisis, at risk, safe, stable, and thriving. For purposes of the study, "sustainable employment" refers to the last two categories, meaning that, at the least, a person or family's employment situation provides a permanent and stable job, wages adequate for food, clothing, and shelter, full health benefits, and the opportunity for job advancement.

As for the definition of "successful" models, most studies in the field have been concerned with "welfare to work"

1. The entire rubric can be viewed online at <http://www.roma1.org/room4a.asp>.

programs, in which the most common measure of success has been whether participants found jobs and moved off the welfare rolls, not whether they reached sustainable employment. No programs have been studied systematically over a long enough period of time to determine whether participants eventually reached the level of sustainable employment.

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While no evaluation studies so far have definitively answered the question about “successful” program models, the literature points to certain programs and practices that are claimed to be effective in preparing people to climb the ladder toward sustainable employment.

The first step is placing people in entry-level jobs. For this purpose, the most rigorous program research in the field, based upon random-assignment, experimental methods, shows that “the most effective programs focus on employment goals and provide a range of services—including job search, basic education, and job training—that are individualized to each participant’s circumstances. Such ‘mixed services’ programs perform far better than programs more narrowly focused on job search or basic education activities.”<sup>2</sup>

Further, since moving people to sustainable employment usually means helping them advance beyond low-paying, entry-level jobs, a range of post-placement services is needed. These should promote job retention and help people take advantage of education and training opportunities that lead to advancement.

Over and above these observations, our review of the literature suggests the following key program elements and practices:

- An emphasis on helping people develop long-term career goals and on developing viable career pathways;

- Having the capacity to analyze the regional labor market, map out career pathways, and provide career development services;
- Integration of basic skills, occupational training and support services, most likely offered by a group of partner organizations;
- Close involvement with employers, with an emphasis on well-paying jobs and occupations, throughout the process, from program design through job development and placement through the post-employment stages. Employer involvement is key to developing realistic pathways that individuals can travel at different stages along a continuum;
- Job placement services that focus on placing participants in the best possible jobs that offer opportunities for advancement along a chosen career path;
- Emphasis on post-placement services, with a focus on helping people acquire additional skills and credentials and assistance in job mobility, whether up the career ladder in the same company or to a better job with a different employer;
- Partnerships with postsecondary education or training organizations to ensure continuity of the career pathway and access to further education or training for program participants.

## **What was learned from the United Way programs?**

The ten organizations in the study, which were selected by United Way staff, differ in the populations they serve, the services they provide, and the outcomes they aim to achieve. All of them direct their services to low-income individuals, but three work exclusively with limited English speakers and two with other special populations, including disabled homeless and at-risk youth. Of the remaining five organizations, three are community development corporations, which emphasize economic development in their local communities, and two are occupational training programs, one specializing in environmental clean-up and the other in computerized office skills.

2. Poppe N., Strawn J., and Martinson K. “Whose Job Is It? Creating Opportunities for Advancement.” In Giloth R.P. (Ed.) *Workforce Intermediaries in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Temple University Press, 2003, page 39.

All ten organizations focus on providing “pre-employment” services, and their programs tend to be relatively short in duration, typically from two to six months. They vary widely in the extent to which they offer such services as case management and support, training in basic “soft skills” and work readiness, and help with career development and career pathways. Most, though not all, work closely with participants to place them in jobs. Some, especially those conducting training in specific occupations, maintain close relationships with employers, while others have limited contact with employers.

As for post-placement services, only two of the organizations have limited staff and resources to provide ongoing follow-up to participants. Others encourage program graduates to keep in touch and come back for help with employment-related issues; but, for the most part, programs are very limited in what they can offer and in the number of people for whom they can provide such services. Staff have little time to assist returning clients, since the major focus of their work is on providing “pre-employment services” to current program participants.

***The diverse needs of program participants call for a diversity of solutions.***

In the discussion with all ten organizations, the group was asked to review the key program elements gathered from the literature review and comment on whether it would be possible for any program to offer them all. The response was unanimous: such a program could never exist in the “real world,” they said. Not only would the expense be prohibitive—one person estimated that it would cost at least \$10,000 a year for each participant, compared to current program costs of \$3,000 to \$6,000 per participant—but the diversity of target populations served by the different programs means that different people need different services. A one-size-fits-all notion of “key program elements” seems inappropriate for such a diverse population, they said. Finally, because moving people to “sustainable employment” means adding long-term post-placement services, this would require adding new staff and capacity, for which new resources would have to be found or current resources diverted. The members of the group doubted that funders would support such a long-term enterprise, especially since it is still unproven whether the desired goal of sustainable employment would, in fact, be achieved by a sufficient number of people.

**Findings**

Based upon our review of the literature and the reality check afforded us by program practitioners, the CommCorp researchers reached seven key conclusions about career-focused models for sustainable employment:

**1. The diverse needs of program participants call for a diversity of solutions.**

A variety of programs is necessary if the diverse needs of the populations served by different programs are to be met. It is inappropriate to take a one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the needs of everyone who is seeking to enter or advance in the labor market. The diversity of clients necessitates a range of service options.

**2. Sustainable employment is a long-term goal, but most organizations can offer only short-term services that help people take one or two steps toward that goal. Accountability measures, therefore, should be aligned with program missions and what can actually be accomplished in a relatively short period of time.**

Accountability systems must incorporate a broader definition of success that takes into consideration that most programs are working with people at the low end of the skills and experience continuum. This expanded definition must be reflected in accountability measures. While no one would

**Table 1: The ten organizations that were part of the study\***

Asian American Civic Association
Centro Latino de Chelsea (Chelsea)
Community Work Services
Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation
International Institute of Boston
JFYNetWorks
Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation
Roca (Chelsea)
Salem Harbor Community Development Corporation (Salem)
YMCA Training Inc.

\* Note: All programs are located in Boston, except as otherwise noted.

argue against sustainable employment as the ultimate goal, the reality is that the majority of program participants are a long way from achieving that goal. It is important, therefore, to recognize as “success” what programs are able to achieve with those who have low skills, little or no work experience, and multiple barriers to advancement.

**3. The same outcome and accountability measures cannot be applied to all programs.**

Accountability measures must reflect the realities faced by participants and the programs serving them. Expectations should be aligned with realistic estimates of the time required for people of various backgrounds to accomplish different objectives and to move into employment.

**4. Strong connections to employers are advisable, but many programs have limited capacity to build and sustain such connections.**

Our research showed that program staff are often very stretched in the different functions they must perform and unable to spend the time and effort required to develop and maintain close relationships with employers.

**5. Placing people in high-potential jobs with exemplary employers is a good strategy, but may not be practical or achievable for most.**

The literature review suggests that it is easier for people to advance toward sustainable employment when they take jobs with employers that offer opportunities for further training, education and advancement, as well as good pay and benefits. It is questionable, however, how many employers fit into this category. Moreover, many people cannot afford

to “hold out” for such positions because they are under pressure to find a job as quickly as possible. Instead, it seems more realistic to follow a strategy such as that documented by Andersson, Holzer and Lane,<sup>3</sup> in which people find jobs working for “better” employers after they have worked for a period of time in less desirable positions.

**6. If United Way-affiliated agencies and other organizations are to assist people in moving to sustainable employment, they must continue to provide services after their clients have been placed in entry-level jobs.**

Since advancement to sustainable employment is a long-term process, extending over a period of years, services that assist people in that process need to be available throughout the different stages of the self-sufficiency continuum, not just at the lower end of the scale. This means providing services not just for the unemployed, but also for incumbent workers at the “safe” and “stable” stages of the scale. If more is to be done in this area, it will be necessary to develop new strategies for delivering such services.

**7. While sustainable employment is an important long-term goal, it is also important to emphasize employability and the capacity to adapt to a changing environment.**

Supporting sustainable employability begins with helping people develop work readiness and soft skills. Once a participant has been placed in a job, an organization might continue by offering open-door services for clients to come back and use program resources to look for better jobs, training or education opportunities. It could also mean that training efforts should include elements to instill frames of mind for greater adaptability in the job market.

3. Andersson F., Holzer H.J., and Lane J.I. *Moving Up or Moving On*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005.



**United Way  
of Massachusetts Bay**

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