



THE ROAD TO GOOD EMPLOYMENT RETENTION

Three Successful Programs
from the Jobs Initiative

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE JOBS INITIATIVE

The Annie E. Casey Foundation Jobs Initiative program was launched in 1995 to provide funding and support for community-based initiatives in five cities—Seattle, St. Louis, Milwaukee, New Orleans and Philadelphia. This nine-year, \$30 million effort aimed to help young, low-income workers find and keep jobs with career ladders and family-supporting pay potential; identify and promote nationally replicable models for employment and job training programs; and better integrate and align local workforce stakeholders in government, the business community, education, and the nonprofit sector. Jobs Initiative sites helped place workers into jobs by the time planned support ended in 2004, focusing on growth fields such as construction, healthcare, manufacturing, and information technology. The entities supported with Jobs Initiative funds, including those described in this report, will continue to operate in their cities, in pursuit of these goals.

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Introduction

THE ROAD TO GOOD EMPLOYMENT RETENTION: Three Jobs Initiative Programs with High Retention

It's a truism of the workforce field that getting a job is much easier than keeping one. As such, long-term labor market retention (at least 12 months) is the most important of the various measures the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative looks at to gauge the success of its jobs programs. The Casey Foundation also closely tracks how program participants fare in terms of wage gains and earning benefits—but job retention is very often a prerequisite for both.

The advantages of retention are fairly straightforward to both jobseekers and employers: for workers, staying on the job leads to greater opportunities for wage gains and promotions at work as well as increased overall stability in their lives, while employers enjoy the benefits of reduced employee turnover and related expenses. Also, to the extent that each program provides ongoing services to the placed worker that focus on retention, the employer is effectively outsourcing some human resources functions—for free. Both government and private funders such as the Casey Foundation have indicated their growing appreciation for the importance of retention over the last few years, placing job training providers on notice that the days when they could meet their contract obligations by merely bringing participants in for training, or even making initial job placements, are gone forever.

Attaining high retention is tough work, and that is why we have spent an intensive period of six months examining the strengths of a varied set of program models. The three projects we examine in this paper are the Work Link/Project R.E.S.P.E.C.T. program in St. Louis and Seattle's Individualized Placement efforts and Office Occupations sector project. These are programs that have focused their efforts on the difficult goal of high retention. All have managed to place and keep between half and about two-thirds of the low-skilled individuals who entered their programs into jobs for over a year. Although several other JI programs have shown early promise with small populations, these programs all have achieved some level of scale and shown impressive retention rates for participants. All told, the Jobs Initiative has supported more than 40 jobs projects, accounting for over 9,500 placements and an overall 12-month retention rate of more than 54 percent.

In a 2003 report on Jobs Initiative projects, Abt Associates found that to best promote long-term retention, advancement, and economic self-sufficiency, “workforce development programs should do everything possible to provide a full range of training (job readiness, soft skills, and hard skills) and supportive services for their clients.”¹ These three projects represent steps along a continuum of

approaches toward those goals; each is intended to meet program participants at different levels of employability through a different combination of strategies. Work Link in St. Louis, for example, is designed to serve more difficult-to-place individuals, offering work supports and some soft skills instruction through total engagement with participants and employers. However, Seattle's individualized placements work with a somewhat more job-ready group and offers the fullest range of services to a diverse group of participants.

The Abt evaluation² included a number of key findings that are reflected in the three projects considered in this paper:

- Participants' access to basic supportive services significantly increases their likelihood of finding jobs;
- "Job readiness" services are pivotal to participants' chances of short-term job retention (defined by the Jobs Initiative as three months);
- "Hard skills" training is vital for participants' prospects of longer-term retention (12 months or longer) as well as advancement and attendant wage gains;
- The more comprehensive the services and training offered, the better participants' chances are for successful work and wage gain outcomes;
- Placement into jobs with employer-provided benefits is likely to lead to higher rates of retention;

- New employees who earn wage gains following initial placement are often on track for long-term retention; and
- Access to a "mentor" for support after placement is another factor often associated with successful outcomes.

These findings confirm the value of soft skills and supportive services for participants entering the workforce, and the importance of hard skills for retention and advancement. The first finding, regarding basic supportive services, is the key to the success Work Link has enjoyed; the program also explicitly utilizes mentoring from previous "alumni" who serve as resources for more recent participants. The Individualized Placement program operated by the community-based partners of the Seattle Jobs Initiative also offers supportive services and places a greater emphasis on soft skills, consistent with Abt's conclusion about job readiness services. Finally, Seattle's Office Occupations project brings in a menu of field-specific skills for jobseekers looking to make careers in the corporate field. This program, which boasts the highest wage outcomes and retention rates of the three, illustrates Abt's conclusion that hard skills training is the pivotal element to facilitate long-term retention and career advancement.

In keeping with the basic approach of the Jobs Initiative, two philosophies underscore the programs profiled in this report:

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS. No one program

can serve every type of jobseeker—so it's important to focus in on who is to be served and structure things accordingly. Depending on the participant population, employment programs might need to emphasize job readiness, basic skills, vocation-specific skills, or some combination of the above. Research shows that everyone benefits from job readiness and from soft skills. Programs must meet people where they are, but the research confirms that the more services they offer, the better the results will be.

RETENTION STARTS ON DAY ONE.

It's vital that program participants start to internalize the “elements of retention”—problem-solving skills, coping in the workplace, seeing things from the employer's perspective and knowing where to turn when difficult issues arise—long before placement. In different ways, all three of these programs pursue this approach. Additionally, all emphasize sustained follow-up after participants start new jobs; these programs remain engaged with both workers and employers for a full year after placement.

Additionally, we found several operational principles consistent across all three of these projects, as detailed below and tracked throughout the profiles:

➤ **STAY FLEXIBLE.** Partners have to be willing to change directions and tactics as necessary. As the strengths and

weaknesses of different program approaches, partnerships and funding strategies emerge, it's vital for providers and intermediaries to be willing to change course.

➤ **MAINTAIN STRONG EMPLOYER TIES.** For these projects to work, they have to be market-relevant—in other words, responsive to a real demand for workers. That means soliciting employer input in program design, continuously getting feedback from businesses where workers are placed, and actively partnering with employers to smooth out problems that arise after participants are placed.

➤ **PROVIDE WORK SUPPORTS AND RELATED SERVICES.** To put low-income, low-skilled jobseekers—who often lack extensive work histories—on track to get and keep a job, it's usually not enough to offer only short-term skills instruction or job-readiness training. To be credible with participants and prove value to employers, programs also have to provide support services that address workers' life issues that get in the way of participants' staying on the job. These issues often include substance abuse, childcare, transportation, housing, and physical and mental health issues.

➤ **BUILD STRONG PARTNERSHIPS.** All of these projects succeeded in large part because the Jobs Initiative sites carefully selected community-based organizations (CBOs), training and

support-services partners with good track records and specific value to the project in question.

➤ **GOOD SCREENING/ASSESSMENT TOOLS.** The Jobs Initiative projects found that effective assessment tools were invaluable in identifying participants' interests and aptitudes, specifying their training and service needs, and ensuring good job matches. All of this helped to promote improved job retention.

➤ **STRONG, ONGOING CASE MANAGEMENT.** The more successful Jobs Initiative projects realized that case management entails more than just the tracking of participants. Effective case management also involves helping participants to set realistic goals and to identify manageable steps to achieve those goals, mobilizing the supportive services needed by participants, and post-placement mentoring and advocacy.

➤ **A RANGE OF INDUSTRY OR EMPLOYER PLACEMENT OPTIONS.** Sectoral projects tend to provide strong connections to employers and career ladders, but frequently offer limited career choices for jobseekers to consider. Jobs projects designed to provide participants with a wider assortment of industry or employer choices therefore often were more effective in responding to the needs and interests of a broad range of disadvantaged job seekers.

It's important to keep in mind that the Jobs Initiative defines successful retention somewhat more strictly than do most other actors in the workforce field. The most important performance milestone for the JI sites is 12-month retention, though three- and six-month intervals serve as intermediary markers. The Casey Foundation also includes in its measure of 12-month retention all placed participants, not just those the projects can keep track of, and allows only short gaps of unemployment during the 12 months following initial placement. This represents a considerably higher standard than most governmental and privately funded programs. The Casey Foundation and its partners have emphasized 12-month retention out of a conviction that this milestone best measures employment stability and the likelihood of wage gains and career advancements to follow.

As the case studies indicate, the most successful jobs programs boast three key elements: work supports, soft skills and hard skills. With all three in place, the stage is set to move participants into career-track positions that can pay enough to support a family. For many jobseekers, however, the road to self-sufficiency requires that they prove to potential employers—and to themselves—that they can meet the responsibilities of everyday work and learn the skills necessary to move ahead.

Case Studies

ST. LOUIS:

WORK LINK/PROJECT R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

Parent organization: St. Louis Regional Jobs Initiative/Better Family Life, Inc.

Target population: Unemployed or underemployed St. Louis residents with low skills, little work history and other significant barriers to employment

Number of placements (all numbers through December 2003): 894

Average placement wage: \$7.24

Average last known wage: \$7.54³

Twelve-month retention rate: 51 percent

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Flexibility: In response to employer feedback, Work Link shortened program length, and changed course content to provide greater emphasis on job searching skills.

Employer ties: An employer committee helped design the initial curriculum; program staff pay regular visits to job sites where large numbers of participants have been placed, helping placed workers deal with issues that might threaten their continued employment.

Support services: Better Family Life is a community development, full-service non-profit that helps participants access a wide range of services that help them prepare for employment. Program staff cite substance abuse, homelessness and past criminal records as especially prevalent barriers.

Business culture in the training: The Better

Family Life training center was consciously designed to resemble a corporate environment, to better acclimate participants to the workplace culture.

Case management, with 12-month follow-up: Participants were assigned case managers who worked with them for a period of 12 months after graduation. This support was essential to helping participants achieve success in their job placements, and to identify the steps they could take to pursue employment advancement.

Connections to family and community:

In addition to employment connections, Better Family Life's case management and mentoring also focused on helping participants to deal more effectively with family responsibilities and to become better citizens in their community. Each of the elements in this holistic approach had a reinforcing effect on the others, and multiplied the benefits that the participants, their families, and neighborhoods received from the Jobs Initiative experience.



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THE BASICS

Work Link/Project R.E.S.P.E.C.T. (Reaching Employment-Seeking People through Education, Counseling and Training) is a hybrid effort designed by Better Family Life that seeks to blend the best principles of corporate America with a holistic approach to

case management and a willingness to bend the normal rules of workforce practice in working for its clients' success. These seeming contradictions come together in Work Link/Project R.E.S.P.E.C.T. project director Carolyn Seward, who created the program in the late 1990s after spending more than two decades in the corporate sector. To ensure that both sides of the organizational vision are well represented, Seward has hired both social service and private-sector veterans in roughly equal numbers to staff Work Link.

Work Link/Project R.E.S.P.E.C.T. is defined by the geography of St. Louis. The main public transit route, Metro Link, runs

from the airport to downtown St. Louis and across the Mississippi River into Illinois. Over 10,000 employers are within 1.5 miles on either side of the track. "The initial thrust was because we were located just one block east of the Metro Link station," Seward recalls. The target population for the program's first contract was concentrated in zip codes along the Metro Link track.

Work Link is a creation of Better Family Link Inc. (BFL), a St. Louis-based community development corporation that has worked in the community since its establishment in 1983. BFL's broad focus embraces not only job training but the development of "social,

cultural, artistic, youth, economic and educational programs that promote positive and innovative changes within urban communities"—a close match with the ambitious goals of the Casey Jobs Initiative.

"BFL has focused on the family," says Seward, who also serves as BFL's associate executive director, "because the family is the single most important entity that reflects the conditions of the community."

From recruitment to post-placement follow-up, Work Link tries to go the extra mile.

From recruitment to post-placement follow-up, Work Link tries to go the extra mile. When first looking for participants, Seward and her team soon realized that their target group

wasn't reading the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* or other conventional sources of notification. "A lot of the target population we were recruiting from weren't even reading the black weekly papers," she says. "We had to advertise on radio and then get out in the neighborhoods. We had recruiters passing out flyers door to door, in grocery shops, barbershops, beauty salons, on weekends wherever people were."

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Work Link begins with an intensive three-week course of pre-employment training, with a fourth week for job searching with employers specially brought in and gradua-

tion ceremonies. Participants aren't paid for their time during those three weeks. Pete Hall, community partnership training manager at the Renaissance Grand Hotel in St. Louis, views this as the primary test of participants' dedication to finding and holding onto a job: "You've got to have a little commitment to show up somewhere for three weeks and not get paid."



During the three weeks of classroom work, staff try to develop skills that will help participants not only find jobs, but keep them. The course emphasizes time management and help in understanding an employer's bottom line. Participants' financial security is covered, too, with instruction on how to set up personal budgets and manage money after finding employment.

One strength of Work Link is that the program knows its participant group well, in terms of what they can and can't do. The majority of Work Link participants are currently or have been on public assistance, but most have work histories and at least a basic level of skills: requirements include testing at a fifth-grade skill level or higher by the Test of Adult Basic Education. By assuring at the recruitment stage that participants have sufficient literacy and math abilities to perform the low-skilled jobs typical of program placements, program staff can focus the limited time in the classroom on what it takes to land and keep a job. This includes class discussions on cultural competency, tough interview questions, and workplace attitude, as well as homework puzzles on "what employers look for" and presentations on crisis prevention. The class also goes beyond workplace scenarios to larger questions of responsibility and citizenship, spending time on diverse issues from how to guard against sexually transmitted diseases to registering to vote.

"I developed my staff such that they should be in the business of removing barriers in order to help get participants gainful employment," says Seward. "Soft skills isn't just resume preparation and how to interview; it's also conflict resolution and how to be a team player."

FOLLOWING UP
Work Link's commitment to going beyond the norm extended into the St. Louis sheriff's office in late 2001, as BFL offi-



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cials looked to remove a surprisingly common barrier to program participants finding work: outstanding traffic warrants. "As a result of our people tracking this over the years, we noticed they couldn't get jobs or sometimes even a place to stay because of their warrants," Seward says. On December 8 of that year, individuals with outstanding warrants were invited to Better Family Life's annual Holiday Expo, where they completed

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a 30-minute workshop on community responsibility and then picked

up vouchers good for warrant amnesty.

Though participants were still responsible for all accumulated fines and court costs and still had to meet court dates, they could go forward in seeking work. Local newspaper accounts estimated the number of outstanding warrants at around 255,000—enough to fill the Edward Jones Dome, home of the St. Louis Rams, four times over.

Work Link's commitment doesn't end with the three weeks of training. "They call every now and again to make sure your job is going okay and see if there are any problems they can help you with," says program graduate Patrina Johnson, who found a certified nursing assistant position at a St. Louis nursing home after finishing the training in 2003.

Pete Hall of the Renaissance Grand Hotel has hired close to 100 Work Link alumni since the hotel opened in February 2003, in positions from catering and banquet services to housekeeping and steward. He estimates that between 50 and 60 percent of his employees from Work Link are still on the

job—a remarkably high percentage, considering that turnover rates at

newly opened hotels routinely approach 200 percent in a year. A former social worker, Hall appreciates the program's ongoing commitment to solving problems in tandem with himself and other hotel staff. "Twice a week a [Work Link] worker comes to the hotel and everyone working on the shift that day can informally talk to him," he explains. "If someone's been late for the past couple weeks, we'll go to them and ask why." Hall characterizes the approach as "intervention before things get out of hand."

Identifying problems before they wreak havoc is a cornerstone of the program.

"When I was in the corporate sector, I felt that I had to follow up with first and second level staff twice a month," recalls Carolyn Seward. "So what would make me think that I wouldn't have to follow up with participants who came in with true barriers?"

SEATTLE: INDIVIDUALIZED PLACEMENT

Parent organization: Seattle Jobs Initiative

Target population: Low-income Seattle residents who “need to get a job right away” and face no severe barriers to employment requiring long-term assistance

Number of placements: 2422

Average placement wage: \$9.54

Average last known wage: \$10.43

Twelve-month retention rate: 57 percent

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Flexibility: SJI reworked case management practices, and has added and dropped CBO partners and rewritten city contracts to reinforce best practices.

Employer ties: SJI leveraged pre-existing relationships between CBO partners and employers as well as new ties SJI forged with firms and industries previously not connected to workforce development.

Support services: CBO partners work with participants to remove barriers to employment.

Strong assessment tools: SJI understood the value of accurate participant assessments at enrollment in order to identify accurately the training and service needs of

each participant, and to determine the best job matches.

A range of placement options: By providing placement options customized to the

interests and aptitudes of each participant, SJI ensured a better fit between the job seeker and the position in which he/she was placed. This was a key factor in achieving both greater satisfaction with these placements (for both employer and employee) and high job retention rates.

Strong case management: SJI concentrated on upgrading the case management capacities of their partner CBOs, particularly in regard to coordination of service delivery among providers, and in providing post-placement support for participants.

THE BASICS

Partnership with community-based organizations (CBOs) has always been a key for the Seattle Jobs Initiative, which relies on its CBO partners not only for individualized placement services but also for recruitment and retention in SJI’s numerous sector initiatives. The organization has referred to

CBOs as “the best partners for achieving SJI’s objective of increasing access to the workforce development system for low-income/low-skilled adults.” SJI has underlined this vision with a constant

focus on improving the capacity of community-based providers and increasing their voice in the Seattle-area workforce system. Through the Individualized Placement pro-



gram, the CBOs provide job readiness training and work supports as well as job placement.

HOW IT EVOLVED

Within months of starting operations in early 1997, the fledgling SJI found that each of its 13 CBO contractors had its own methods for the key steps in providing workforce services, from client assessment to post-placement follow-up. This created unnecessary difficulties in evaluating CBO performance and gauging client outcomes. Worse, these ingrained habits seemed to be contributing to job retention rates that fell considerably below the levels SJI had set as goals.

“It was a little like the League of Nations,” recalls Bob Falk of TRAC Associates, a 20-year-old for-profit employment and training agency that has worked with SJI since its inception. “Everyone did things differently and nobody agreed.” Among the areas of uncertainty between SJI and its vendor partners were who was responsible for assessing participants, who was enrolled, what assessment should entail, and how to divvy up other responsibilities between SJI and its contractors.

Finding precious few sources on how to train for case management, SJI had to create a program almost from scratch. “We started

meeting together for several months putting together a training on best practices,” recalls Judy Summerfield, a former SJI staffperson now with Seattle’s Department of Human Services. Jobs for the Future provided background materials on case management and best practices in employment and training, but found little in the way of resources on how to integrate case management with employment and training. “We started doing specialized segments on the barriers many clients were facing and calling on experts in the fields of mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse, and put together trainings as separate modules on special interest areas,” Summerfield says. “This gave case managers great confidence in how to do a comprehensive assessment,

how to make successful referrals—the basics in case management came through those special issue areas.”

One simple but crucial innovation was to start evaluating participants by level of risk. Case managers began to categorize each individual in an SJI training program as High-, Medium-, or Low-Needs, according to clear definitions of each. In addition to helping staff determine where to focus their efforts during training, the system proved a great help in retention efforts after placement. “Low might mean that a person has it pretty much together in terms of financial situation, social, housing—

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they’re pretty stable,” Falk explains. “Medium means that there are things other than employment issues they need to work on, and high shows greater need—to move out of a halfway house, or outpatient help, or there’s a history of getting jobs and losing them. It tells us how intense the retention effort needs to be.”

SJI’s emphasis on long-term retention soon became part of the culture at TRAC and the organization’s other CBO partners. “People [began] making statements like ‘retention starts at the point of assessment,’ because that’s the time you’re learning what kinds of issues might come up,” says Judy Summerfield. “That was a bit of a mantra I started to hear, and not just in meetings with people working on best practices.”



Laura Rowley, now deputy director at SJI, was the employment director at TRAC when the best practices standards were being articulated and made sure her staff was engaged from the outset. “Seven TRAC case managers, job developers and retention specialists attended the first 60-hour Case Management Best Practices and Standards (CMBPS) training series,” says Rowley. She cites a number of positive changes stemming from the training, including fewer questions on how to develop or find resources, better teamwork among the staff, a clearer understanding on the assessment and job readiness training process, and better networking and support for engaged staff.

SJI has run three 60-hour CMBPS training classes in partnership with Antioch University Seattle and launched a fourth at the end of October 2004. Now an independent nonprofit after spinning off from Seattle city government, SJI has indicated that CBOs will continue to serve as the entry point for low-skilled and low-income adults into the workforce system and will remain the linchpin of SJI’s ongoing efforts to improve workforce services in the region.

SEATTLE:

OFFICE OCCUPATIONS SECTOR TRAINING

Parent organization: Seattle Jobs Initiative

Target population: Seattle-area residents with some or no work history, who may begin in Adult Basic Education or English as a Second Language remediation but must test at an eighth-grade or higher level for reading, writing and math skills prior to the office training.

Number of placements: 317

Average placement wage: \$10.31

Average last known wage: \$10.99

Twelve-month retention rate: 67 percent

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Flexibility: Through successive program cycles, SJI adjusted the duration and coursework, and placed more emphasis on the internship component.

Employer ties: The initial curriculum for Office Occupations was designed in conjunction with an employer steering committee; SJI still holds regular meetings with the committee and employers offer internship sites.

Support services: SJI's CBO partners help participants address a wide range of barriers to employment.

Strong ongoing case management: SJI concentrated on upgrading the case management skills of the CBOs, particularly in regard to coordination of service delivery among

providers, and in providing post-placement support for participants.

Good assessment tools: SJI understood the value of accurate participant assessments at enrollment in order to identify accurately the training and service needs of each participant, and to determine the best job matches.

Use of internships: SJI found that internships were a valuable way for participants to develop a better appreciation of the necessary skills and work culture entailed in the office occupations. These internships also allowed participants to establish direct relationships with employers and/or to obtain references that facilitated their ability to secure post-training employment.

THE BASICS

The work of the Jobs Initiative sites has helped prove the long-held theory that employer engagement is a necessary ingredient to any successful employment program. While this is true in any job placement effort, pursuing an industry strategy requires an even broader commitment on the part of the

implementing organization: not only is it necessary to build relationships with individual employers to determine what they need and how best to work with them, there's a larger set of competencies to be



mastered and skills that apply not just to a single firm, but to a range of employers. The Seattle Jobs Initiative's Office



Occupations program has offered a near-textbook example of how to work with employers to develop a broadly applicable curriculum, and how to leverage individual employer relationships to both place successful program participants and create a continuous feedback mechanism that allows the program to adapt to changing industry circumstances and needs.

Office Occupations is a five-month (22 week) program. The first two months are exclusively devoted to classroom training; in the third month, participants begin internships that take up two days a week, all day. Since fall 2002, instruction has been provided—and some training costs borne—by the Seattle Vocational Institute (SVI). Office Occupations program case managers assess each participant's financial situation, and if necessary, there are funds that can help "gap fill" throughout the five-month training period.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Through years of intensive interaction with the community-based organizations it has contracted with, SJI has sought successfully to instill the concept that the elements of retention—including problem-solving skills, coping in the workplace, seeing things from

the employer's perspective and knowing where to turn when difficult issues arise—begin long before a partici-

pant is placed into a job. In fact, it starts even before the individual begins training. So while each of SJI's five CBO partners does its own recruiting, all work along the same lines—and once it's time to put classes together for training, case managers from all involved contractors work as a team.

"We use what's called the 'full funnel' approach," explains SJI's Sherman Wilkins, who manages the sectoral projects. "That includes enrollment, assessment, job readiness training, sector readiness orientation, placement and retention."

J.L. Hernandez, a veteran case manager with longtime SJI contractor TRAC Associates, describes a recruitment and assessment process designed to ensure that the large majority of participants who begin training will still be around to complete it. "We invite individuals to come to orientation for the program. Then we assess them, and judge if they're in or out for training." The assessment process includes an interview which increases the value of the training for those accepted into the program. One recent graduate reported, "I like that they (SJI) made us interview to get into the office training. It made me feel special, like I had earned my way into the training. Because

not everyone would get in. That's how I knew SJI would be a different kind of training program."

Case managers from all the agencies supplement that initial assessment by reviewing participants at different steps during the orientation and training process. "Job readiness shows the red flags," Hernandez adds. "All the case managers have a voice on who is and isn't appropriate." Wilkins notes that participants who do fall by the wayside are often referred out to address whatever specific issues they're facing, and many return at a later time. Typically, a class at SVI starts out with about 30 participants; on average, roughly 80 percent complete the program.

Karen Ceaser, training supervisor at SVI, describes the two-day orientation to Office Occupations and all the sector programs offered at the facility. "We point out our expectations." These include that participants have plans for childcare, housing, transportation, professional dress and a budget sheet. "There's a participant agreement form, which is like a company handbook. Because they have to agree, it ensures they read it. Everything they need to know is in there." The program is designed to mirror

the workplace: participants must punch in and punch out, and time they miss must be made up.

But as SJI asks a lot of its sector participants, the program provides support and flexibility in return. "It's hard for a person to fail," Ceaser says. Case managers are in constant communication with trainers, and counselors

for substance abuse and mental health issues are available to participants on a regular basis.

The program, which runs 660 hours over the 22 weeks of training, focuses heavily in two areas: upgrading participants' computer skills

to the point where they can function quickly and competently in an office setting, and preparing them to meet expected standards of conduct and culture in the workplace. Courses within the training include keyboarding, office procedures, customer service skills, word processing, spreadsheet and data entry. An internship, which includes 165 hours, is the largest component.

PLACEMENT AND FOLLOW UP

About halfway through the training, participants in SJI's Office Occupations program really get serious about finding jobs. Again, this is a process in which SJI staff and case managers from the contracting agencies

Case managers from all the agencies supplement that initial assessment by reviewing participants at different steps during the orientation and training process.

work together. At the 11-week mark, SJI employer broker Susan Goodwin begins twice-a-week visits for “interview training”—a process in which she both evaluates and instructs participants.

“I learn a lot from handshake, posture, and asking them to tell me about themselves,” says Goodwin. “And I tell them about employer expectations and ask behavior-based questions. We practice different scenarios. I’ve talked to employers—the questions come from research.” Among the topics she might cover with trainees are how they should address gaps in their employment history, or a criminal history, or irrelevant work experience. After covering the basics, she moves to mock interviews, how to research a potential employer or get directions to an interview, what to wear and how to write a thank-you note. In the last month of the program, participants learn to conduct a job search through family and friends, groups, the newspaper, and online.

Goodwin is in charge of another key component of the Office Occupations program—the internship, which participants begin in the third month of training. “Internships are onsite with an employer host Tuesday to Thursday, 8 to 5,” she says. “Participants use the hard skills they’ve learned. They’re being mentored and forging relationships, and some jobs have been created [through the placements]. We haven’t had many unhappy hosts.”

Regence Blue Shield, a health insurance provider with over a million members in Washington state, has brought on about 60 SJI interns since 2001. Regence also serves on the Office Occupations employer committee, which meets quarterly to provide SJI an opportunity to hear from employers about current or anticipated hiring, what sort of skill needs they are facing or expecting, and other trends in their fields. According to Human Resources Generalist Holly Wirth of Regence Blue Shield, the employer committee generally includes about eight employers and four SJI staff members.

At Regence, Wirth says most of the nearly 60 interns SJI has referred have ranged between late-20s to 50s, including “many people looking for a second chance.” Edwin Menjivar seems to fit that description. Menjivar, 40, is a customer service representative for Regence who went through the Office Occupations training from June to November 2000. Previously a sailor in the Navy, Menjivar was referred to SJI’s Office Occupations program by CAMP (Central Area Motivation Program), then one of SJI’s CBO partners. He recalls long days of learning clerical and administrative skills, usually starting at 8 a.m. and ending at 5 p.m. “They were very strict about things, like in the military.”

But along with the discipline came needed support, from both his trainers and his case manager at CAMP, who provided help with food vouchers, transportation and day care

for Menjivar's then-infant daughter, in the same building where he was getting trained. "I dropped my daughter off on the first floor," he remembers. "I could look in on her at lunch." Meanwhile, the training team was readying him for an internship placement, based on his own preferences. "They asked us what we wanted to do," he says. "I said I wanted to work in the HR department of a major corporation with good benefits. Coming here was what I wished for. I interned two days a week for two months."

After graduating, Regence offered to bring Menjivar on full-time, and he gladly accepted. "I've advanced to the second highest level in my department in about three years," he says, adding that he plans to go back to school at night. He remains in touch with SJI, noting, "I still feel like part of the family."

He's not alone. The combination of assiduous follow-up, substantive skills training and close partnership with employers has helped the Office Occupations sector project to post a remarkable one-year retention rate of 67.8 percent, highest of the projects covered in

this report. Participants also have posted the highest average wage and the largest wage increase compared to previous jobs of these three projects. While SJI's other sectoral initiatives have yielded more mixed results, the site's great success in Office Occupations bodes well for improvement in its other efforts as time goes on.

FOOTNOTES

1 Scott Hebert, Anne St. George, Barbara Epstein, "Breaking Through: Overcoming Barriers to Family-Sustaining Employment," report prepared by Abt Associates Inc. and the New School University for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, February 2003, p.2.

2 Ibid.

3 Because the data on post-placement wage increases available from the Jobs Initiative sites for this report are dated, the actual average wage increases achieved by Jobs Initiative participants are likely to be higher than those shown.

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Conclusion

Putting it simply, retention isn't easy. Particularly when many participants come to their new jobs with little work history and outside "barriers" like childcare problems or substance abuse history, there's a lot that can go wrong. The programs in this report vary in many respects, but they share a commitment both to preparing jobseekers for the culture of the workplace, and identifying and addressing those "life issues" that can interfere with sustained employment even if everything on the job is fine.

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Beyond those universal elements, these three programs achieved success by "knowing their audiences"—keying in on what their jobseekers could and couldn't do, and what the employers who would hopefully hire program graduates wanted and needed. In most cases, partnerships with community-based organizations helped the JI sites better understand, and work with, program participants.

One key contribution of the Casey Jobs Initiative was to further the trend away from the traditional, mission-driven approach to job training and employment services in favor of a "dual-customer" approach focused on both businesses and new workers.

On employer engagement, the key was to get "buy-in" and build credibility by working with firms on program design, continuously fine-tuning programs in response to employer feedback, and staying in touch with both placed workers and their bosses to help address whatever

problems came up after placement. Casey's support for the Jobs Initiative is scheduled to sunset this year, but these programs will go forward—and hopefully inspire others to benefit from the lessons they learned.



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

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