



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Making a Good Jobs Program Even Better: How to Strengthen DC's Project Empowerment

By Ed Lazere

A largely successful effort by the District to help people find lasting work would do even more good if some changes are made.

Each year, the District gives hope to 800 residents who struggle with unemployment by placing them in jobs and paying their wages for up to six months. They work in a range of jobs – from restaurants to non-profit health clinics to DC government agencies. Project Empowerment could be even more effective, however, by beefing up the support provided to workers and taking other steps to help connect participants to the workplace, based on the DC Fiscal Policy Institute's [review](#) of the program.

Most Project Empowerment participants face employment barriers because of a criminal record. For them, a subsidized job offers a chance at work experience, networking, and skills development in a supportive environment. Ideally, that helps lead to permanent, unsubsidized employment. Subsidized jobs programs can help employers, too, by offering free or low-cost labor to expand their business and the chance to test out a worker before making a long-term hire.



Source: www.123rf.com

At the same time, the success of subsidized jobs programs is not guaranteed and depends on careful design. About half of the people who start Project Empowerment are working in an unsubsidized job after six months, and one-quarter are working a year later. While this matches the performance of similar programs, there are ways that Project Empowerment could do better. DCFPI's review recommends the following steps.

- **Improve private-sector job placements:** The most effective programs place workers on the payroll of their employer but in DC, Project Empowerment participants are paid by the program, and this can make them feel less like a real worker. Some programs pay only part of the wages and set an expectation that good employees will be hired, but DC does not.
- **Provide robust coaching for workers.** Employers note that timeliness, workplace behavior, and related characteristics are key to retaining employment. Project Empowerment doesn't have enough job coaches to help participants in these areas, and there is no job coaching once participants transition to unsubsidized jobs.

- **Build more connections to education and training:** A sizable share of Project Empowerment participants have not finished high school, so more is needed to connect with literacy programs, either outside Project Empowerment or in combination with a Project Empowerment job. In addition, residents who complete Project Empowerment and fail to keep a job may benefit from skills training, but the program does not have many provisions for connect participants to training.
- **Improve collection of data on program outcomes:** Project Empowerment has the capacity to measure its own effectiveness – such as job retention and reductions in criminal recidivism – but this information is not reported in a useful fashion. Nor does it appear to be used to inform program improvements. The District should track data on participants more fully to assess the impact on long-term employment, wages, and recidivism, and to assess the kinds of job placements that are likely to be most successful.

Our full review of Project Empowerment can be found [here](#).