



*An Affiliate of the
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*
820 First Street NE, Suite 460
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 408-1080 Fax (202) 325-8839
www.dcfpi.org

April 1, 2015

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

By Ed Lazere

Introduction and Summary

Project Empowerment – a DC program that places unemployed residents in jobs and pays their wages for up to six months – should be re-designed to more effectively help residents keep those jobs when the subsidy ends. While Project Empowerment has features that have proven effective, and its results are about average among similar programs elsewhere, just one in four participants is working a year after starting the program. There are reforms that would improve Project Empowerment and make it a top performer nationally, rather than average.

Project Empowerment is one of the District's main jobs programs for adults, serving 800 residents every year. It follows a model used in many jurisdictions, under which adults who face trouble finding work are placed into jobs for a limited period of time, with wages paid by the program rather than by the employer. DC's program offers fully subsidized employment for up to six months and is geared toward residents who have a hard time finding employment because of previous incarceration, homelessness, or a history of substance abuse. About 90 percent of participants have a criminal record.

Subsidized jobs programs are important for several reasons. They provide needed jobs and income to residents who otherwise may have few options. They offer a chance for work experience, networking, and skills development in a supportive environment, which ideally helps lead to permanent, unsubsidized employment. Subsidized jobs can help reduce long-term use of government assistance and criminal recidivism. And, these programs can help employers by offering free or low-cost labor to expand their business and the chance to test out a worker before hiring them permanently.

At the same time, the success of subsidized jobs programs is not guaranteed and depends on careful program design. Some programs have had limited effects on long-term employment prospects, and ongoing experimentation with program design is being pursued to develop more effective models.

This review of Project Empowerment finds both strengths and opportunities for improvement. The program follows nationally-proven practices in several areas, such as placing participants largely

This report was supported by a grant from the Greater Washington Workforce Development Collaborative, an initiative of the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region.

with private employers and providing financial bonuses for participants who keep their jobs for a specified amount of time. Project Empowerment's employment outcomes appear to match national averages for subsidized jobs programs. About one of two participants transitions to an unsubsidized job, and half of those workers keep their job for a year. Project Empowerment recipients also have a lower rate of criminal recidivism than returning citizens overall.

Nevertheless, there are reforms that would make the program more effective:

- **Change program design to improve private-sector job placements:** Most Project Empowerment participants are placed with private sector employers, but without features used in other programs that help lead to unsubsidized jobs. The most effective programs in other communities place workers on the payroll of their employer – with the employer reimbursed from the program – rather than having the worker paid by the program. Many successful programs provide only partial wage subsidies and set an expectation that good employees will be hired. These approaches might help the District connect participants with businesses that are ready to expand and keep their Project Empowerment employee after the subsidy ends.
- **Improve program design to serve citizens returning from prison:** If the District continues to view Project Empowerment as primarily for those with a criminal record – a reasonable goal – it should give priority to residents coming straight from prison. Moreover, Project Empowerment should measure rates of recidivism among participants, since this may be a key benefit of the program. While information on recidivism was collected for this analysis, Project Empowerment managers do not routinely collect this information or use it to assess the program's success.
- **Provide robust coaching for workers:** Employers note that “soft skills” such as timeliness and workplace behavior are key to retaining employment. Project Empowerment helps participants with conflict resolution and behavior in the workplace, yet these job coaches are expected to help a large number of participants, making it difficult to provide high quality support. In addition, Project Empowerment provides no job coaching once participants transition to unsubsidized jobs. Enhanced job coaching could improve participants' ability to resolve workplace problems that arise during the subsidy period and could provide ongoing support to help participants keep permanent jobs.
- **Improve connections with education and training programs:** Because a sizable share of Project Empowerment participants have not finished high school, more may need to be connected with literacy programs, either outside Project Empowerment or in combination with a Project Empowerment job. In addition, workers who complete Project Empowerment and fail to keep a job may be good candidates for skills training that will help them be better equipped to keep a job in the future. Finally, Project Empowerment could use resources from the employment and training component of SNAP (formerly food stamps) to help pay for expenses such as transportation for recipients who also receive SNAP.
- **Solicit more feedback from employers:** Project Empowerment staff conduct surveys of employers to assess their satisfaction with the program, and employers submit monthly progress reports. But the program could solicit more detailed feedback, such as whether or not participants were hired for unsubsidized employment and what influenced this decision.

- **Create clear program rules with public input:** Key features of Project Empowerment, such as bonuses provided for job retention, are set by the Department of Employment Services and are not dictated by law, regulation or any process with public input. This means that the program can be changed substantially without public input or notification. The Mayor and Council should develop a process that ensures that Project Empowerment’s rules are clearly publicized and solicits public input on major program changes. Clear publication of program rules and publication of an annual program plan would accomplish these goals.
- **Improve data collection:** Project Empowerment has the capacity to measure its own effectiveness – such as job retention and recidivism – but this information is not reported in a useful fashion and it does not appear to be used to inform program improvements. The District should track data on participants more fully to see the impact on long-term employment, wages, and recidivism, and to assess the kinds of job placements that are likely to be most successful.–

I. What Is DC’s Project Empowerment Program?

Project Empowerment, created in 2001, is one of the District’s largest employment programs for adults, serving 800 residents per year at a cost of roughly \$9 million.¹ Participants are placed in jobs for up to 6 months – or in rare cases up to 12 months – with wages paid entirely by the District. Participants currently are paid \$8.50 an hour, which is \$1 less than the DC minimum wage.²

Project Empowerment is open to District residents between the ages of 22 to 54. (Younger or older residents can qualify for other District education or training programs³). Participants must be unemployed and not receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Insurance, or unemployment compensation. The program is targeted to residents who “face barriers to employment due to deficiencies in education, work experience, work training, work skills, prior incarceration, or the loss of certain occupations or industries from the economy of the District or the Washington Metropolitan area.”⁴ Participants must have at least three of the following employment challenges:

- Reading and math skills below an 8th grade level;
- Lack of high school degree or GED;
- Prior substance abuse;
- Homelessness;
- Long-term unemployment; or,
- Felony conviction.

¹ District of Columbia Fiscal Year 2015 Budget and Financial Plan. Volume 2, Agency Budget Chapters—Part I, Department of Employment Services, B-80. In budget documents, Project Empowerment is referred to as Transitional Employment.

² As of the release of this report, Project Empowerment’s leaders plan to keep the program’s hourly pay at \$8.50 an hour as DC’s minimum wage rises to \$10.50 in 2015 and \$11.50 in 2016.

³ Residents under 22 can participate in subsidized work through the Year-Round and Summer Youth Employment Program and those 55 and older can qualify for the Senior Community Service Employment Program.

⁴ District of Columbia Official Code § 32-1331.

Who Participates?

Currently, Project Empowerment largely serves residents who have a prior incarceration or criminal record. About 90 percent of participants “returning citizens,” a group that faces unemployment at very high rates.⁵ Nearly one out of two previously incarcerated DC residents were unemployed, according to a 2011 Council for Court Excellence survey. Eighty percent said they were asked “all the time” about their criminal records when applying for jobs.⁶

Four out of five Project Empowerment participants are men, and a majority are African-American. The average age of participants is 39. More than half live in Ward 7 or Ward 8.

The low education level of many participants makes it difficult to find employment. One in four have not received a high school diploma or GED. Only 41 percent have a high school diploma or GED, 15 percent have a vocational certificate, and 20 percent have some college credit.

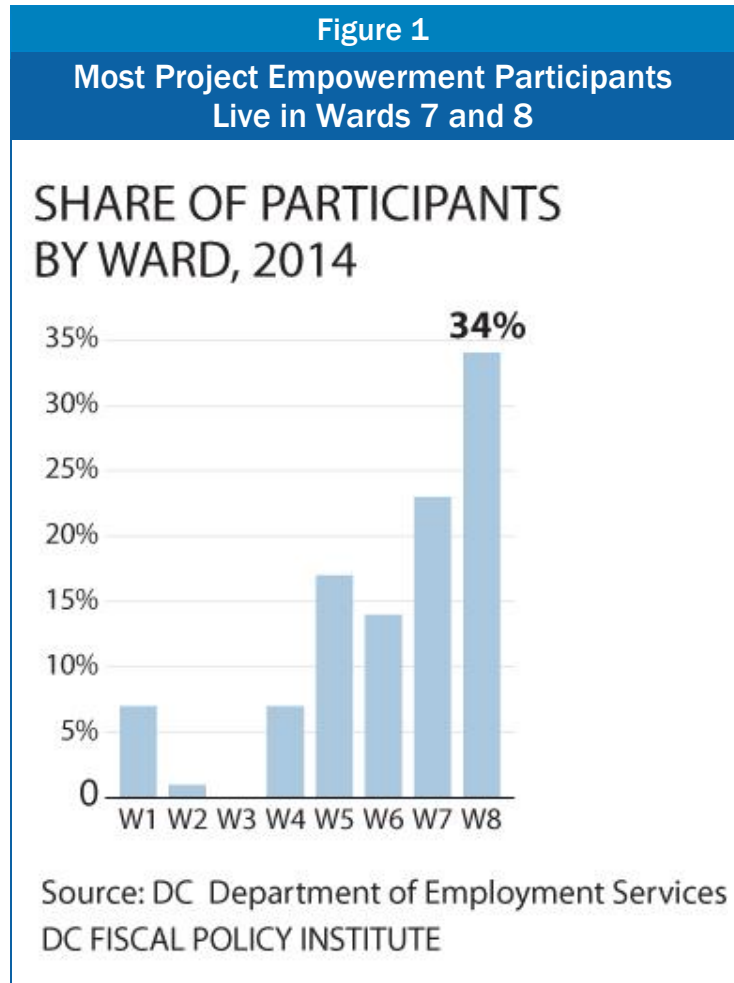
How the Program Helps Participants

Project Empowerment’s current funding allows it to serve approximately 800 participants per year. There is currently no waiting list, although there has been in the past. Participants typically are referred to Project Empowerment after registering at one of the city’s American Job Centers and spending 30 days looking for a job on their own.

The program begins with three weeks of “Job Readiness Training” focused on managing behavior, interview skills, and basic computer literacy.

⁵ Information on Project Empowerment participant characteristics was provided by program staff to DCFPI.

⁶ Council for Court Excellence, *Unlocking Employment Opportunity for Previously Incarcerated Persons in the District of Columbia*, 2011, page 5.



Participants are then placed in a job. Project Empowerment allows for a six-month subsidized work placement with a possible six-month extension, though such extensions are rare and only happen if the participant is guaranteed an unsubsidized job at the end. In fiscal year 2014, subsidized jobs averaged 5.5 months. Project Empowerment officials explained that “[N]ot all participants complete the entire six months because some transition into full-time employment while others are unable to manage their multiple barriers such as lack of education, homelessness, mental health, incarceration, and addiction issues which impacts the length of employment.”⁷

Along with a subsidized job, the program offers a variety of services to support participants.

- Counseling is provided by a DC Department of Behavioral Health staff member to help with stress or other problems.
- Education Opportunities Center, a nonprofit, advises participants on obtaining education or specialized job training.
- Computer training is provided by Grand Enterprises, a company the city has contracted with.
- Capital Area Asset Builders provides basic education about managing finances and savings, and Wells Fargo Bank offers participants the chance to open a checking and savings accounts. Participants can also be matched with professional mentors through Streetwise Partners.

Connection to Other Training Services

Project Empowerment has some connections to other workforce development services and to the court system. These kinds of connections are important because residents who apply to Project Empowerment ultimately may benefit from a different kind of training or education program.

- **Training:** Project Empowerment participants can be referred to federally-funded training through DC’s American Jobs Centers. However, this program is limited by federal law to training for specific occupations, and these jobs often do not match Project Empowerment participants’ skills. It is not clear how many Project Empowerment participants are referred to this training each year. Beyond this, Project Empowerment referred 22 participants to get training from the DC Department of Public Works to receive a commercial driver’s license

Project Empowerment Participant: Paul

Paul, a mid-20s resident of Ward 7, dropped out of Dunbar Senior High School in the 10th grade. He “fell to the streets” and was incarcerated. He worked in the kitchen while in prison. He learned of Project Empowerment from his sister. Paul said that he didn’t know how to act in an interview and that Project Empowerment taught him how to converse with a potential employer and interact with co-workers. His first subsidized job was with a food truck, where Paul worked in the prep kitchen. He kept to himself and did not engage with co-workers, which created tensions. “I was not really a people person,” Paul said. He ended up leaving that job, though he learned that his behavior was part of the problem, and he reflected on what he learned in Project Empowerment. “They taught me how to carry myself, how to calm down, how to get rid of negative thoughts.” He was later placed in the kitchen of a restaurant on Capitol Hill, where he now works full-time earning \$12 an hour. “You have people who can’t get their foot in the door because of their past,” Paul said. “Project Empowerment opens it up for them.”

⁷ Department of Employment Services responses to questions of DC Council Committee on Housing and Workforce Development, February 29, 2012.

and then a position at DPW.⁸ It Department of Employment Services not appear that Project Empowerment participants are referred to other training programs, including the Department of Employment Services’ locally funded adult job training program.

- **Connection to Education:** About 50 Project Empowerment participants combine education and training, spending 4 hours per day on a job site and another 4 hours in a GED program – in the Ballou STAY or Spingarn STAY program. In addition, some participants who score below the fifth grade level in initial assessments are referred to employment programs through the DC Department of Disability Services, known as vocational rehabilitation.
- **Connection to Agencies Serving Returning Citizens:** Project Empowerment includes a component operated by the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) for up to 75 residents who are under court supervision.⁹ In addition, Project Empowerment receives 30 participants per year who are referred from the DC Office of Returning Citizen Affairs. Finally, Project Empowerment is developing a plan to accept referrals from two District halfway houses.¹⁰

Project Empowerment Employers

Employers who provide subsidized worksites are recruited through Project Empowerment job developers, who reach out to businesses in person, look for leads through internet want ads or signs placed in businesses, and word of mouth.

Two out of three subsidized jobs provided through Project Empowerment were with private employers in 2014, while 21 percent of participants were placed in government agencies and 15 percent were placed in non-profits.¹¹

Project Empowerment Includes Various Types of Workplaces ¹²		
Private	Government	Non-Profit
Clyde's Group	DC Department of the Environment	Alliance of Concerned Men
Edgewood Management	DC Department of Human Services	Capital Area Asset Builders
Gelberg Signs	DC Department of Public Works	Catholic Charities
MC Dean	DC Department of Housing and Community Development	La Clinica Del Pueblo
Perkins Coie LLP	DC Department of Transportation	Our DC
W.C. Smith	DC Department of Employment Services	Skill Force
Unique Cuts	Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority	The Community Partnership
Union Kitchen	Deanwood Wellness Center	Gospel Rescue Ministries

⁸ Information provided by Project Empowerment staff to DCFPI.

⁹ These participants are included in the total count of Project Empowerment participants reported by DOES, and the expenditures are included in the DOES budget in the Project Empowerment line.

¹⁰ Information provided by Project Empowerment staff to DCFPI.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Employer list acquired from DC Council Committee on Housing and Workforce Development.

How Project Empowerment Is Staffed and Funded

Project Empowerment is funded by the District entirely with local tax revenues, and the program’s main costs are for personnel and the subsidized salaries of participants. Funding for Project Empowerment has declined in recent years, from more than \$13 million in 2009 to \$9 million in 2015.

In program year 2014, Project Empowerment had 18 full-time employees.

- **6 Job Coaches:** Job coaches do worksite visits with participants every two weeks and also meet with worksite supervisors.
- **3 Job Developers:** The job developers are charged with relationship building with employers, in order to both retain current worksites and recruit new ones.
- **2 Facilitators:** These staff lead the three-week Job Readiness Training that all participants attend.
- **7 Other Staff:** Two intake specialists conduct initial interviews and assessment of eligibility, and they provide case management during the Job Readiness Training. Other staff include the director of the program, two program analysts, an administrative assistant, and an operations manager.

Project Empowerment Funding	
Year	Funding
2009	\$13.2 million
2010	\$9.7
2011	\$8.4
2012	\$9.7
2013	\$9.5
2014	\$8.2
2015	\$9.1

II. How Effective Are Subsidized Jobs?

Rigorous evaluations of subsidized jobs programs have shown mixed results, but in recent years a number of states created programs with promising results.

Across the country, there are two kinds of subsidized job programs that are similar to Project Empowerment.

- **Transitional Jobs:** These programs help participants develop basic work habits like timeliness and dealing with conflict on the job. Participant wages typically are paid by the program, rather than the host site, and program staff check in with participants – and sometimes employers – to assess progress and resolve problems. The host site usually is not expected to hire workers at the end of the subsidy. This model, which generally is considered best suited for those with the greatest challenges, is the model most closely followed by DC’s Project Empowerment program.
- **Direct job placement:** Other programs place participants onto an employer’s payroll, with wages reimbursed by the program. For-profit employers often see the worker as a chance to expand their business, and in many cases, programs set an expectation that good performers will be retained. Participants typically receive few supportive services beyond the job. In some cases, the subsidy covers only part of a worker’s wages or phase out over time. This model,

often described as “on-the-job training,” is best suited to workers with less challenging employment barriers.¹³

Research findings on transitional jobs programs reveals the following:

- **Many programs like Project Empowerment do not produce better employment over the long-term:** Rigorous analyses of some transitional jobs programs that focus on work exposure for residents with severe employment barriers have found that they do not lead to sustained increases in employment or earnings.¹⁴ Nevertheless, recent programs following this model – created in many states with federal funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act – found improvements in both employment rates and earnings, including for long-term unemployed workers and others with severe barriers.¹⁵ For example, participants in Florida’s program had a \$4,000 increase in annual earnings, compared with only a \$1,500 increase among a group not enrolled in the program. However, these recent programs have not been studied at the most rigorous level by comparing program participants with a control group of similar non-participants.
- **Programs may have other important benefits, like reduced recidivism:** Some transitional jobs programs targeted on returning citizens, especially those just coming out of prison, resulted in lower recidivism rates, even when long-term employment prospects did not improve.¹⁶ A New York City employment program for former prisoners, for example, reduced rates of recidivism, with the greatest effects occurring when participants started the program shortly after leaving prison.
- **Programs that place workers in private sector jobs have higher success:** Transitional jobs programs that place workers with private companies, even without any additional supports, increase unsubsidized employment and earnings. Recent state-level transitional jobs funded with ARRA funds, for example, stressed placement of participants in private-sector jobs and on the company’s payroll, with the program reimbursing the employer. This approach does not include supportive services and may not work well for workers facing the most serious employment barriers.¹⁷

The research on transitional jobs identifies other design features that can contribute to a program’s success. In particular, financial incentives, such as bonuses to workers who find and retain an unsubsidized job make a program more effective. For example, the New Hope program in Milwaukee provided financial incentives to parents who worked at least 30 hours a week, and it

¹³ See description of types of subsidized jobs programs in “Testimony of Dan Bloom, Director, Health and Barriers to Employment, MDRC, Before the House Committee on Ways and Means, Human Resources Subcommittee,” July 30, 2014.

¹⁴ See, for example, Erin Jacobs Valentine, *Returning to Work after Prison: Final Result from the Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration*, MDRC, May 2012.

¹⁵ Anne Roder and Mark Elliott, *Stimulating Opportunity: An Evaluation of ARRA-Funded Subsidized Employment Programs*, Economic Mobility Corporation, September 2013

¹⁶ Cindy Redcross, et al, *More than a Job: Final Results from the Evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities Transitional Jobs Program*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

¹⁷ Dan Bloom, Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, July 30, 2014, op. cit.

resulted in improved employment for participants.¹⁸ These incentives may encourage participants to take low-wage or part-time work that otherwise would be undesirable.¹⁹ And, programs that pay workers below-market wages during the subsidy period create an incentive to look for a higher-paying unsubsidized jobs, resulting in higher rates of success.²⁰

III. How Project Empowerment Compares with Other Programs Nationally

As noted, Project Empowerment operates using a transitional job model, which is well suited to workers with the greatest barriers to work. It includes (or soon will include) many features of successful programs, such as placing participants largely with private employers, and its outcomes are consistent with programs nationally.

At the same time, Project Empowerment does not reflect other best practices, such as consistently connecting with training and expecting employers to hire participants who perform well.

Strong Features of Project Empowerment

Project Empowerment includes many attributes of strong programs:

- **Connection to private employers:** Project Empowerment’s emphasis on placing participants with private employers is a strength. While nonprofit and government employers often are able to provide a supportive environment and help participants build skills, they are less likely than private employers to be able to hire when subsidy ends.
- **Below-market wages:** Project Empowerment pays \$8.50 an hour, less than minimum wage, which creates an incentive for participants to seek an unsubsidized job with better pay.
- **Bonuses (new in Fiscal Year 2015):** Project Empowerment will offer bonuses starting in 2015, which have been shown to boost job retention.
- **Connection to court system:** Subsidized jobs programs targeted on returning citizens have been shown to reduce recidivism, and most Project Empowerment participants have a prior criminal conviction. The program works directly with Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) and the Office of Returning Citizen Affairs (ORCA) for a

Project Empowerment Participant: Clifton

Clifton graduated from Ballou High School three decades ago and went into the Navy, but eventually started selling drugs and served 10 years of prison time. At Rivers Correctional Facility, where he served, he earned a certificate in commercial cleaning. “I tried to get as much job experience as possible inside those walls,” Clifton said. Clifton found work in food service and with a moving company, but eventually was out of work. He learned about Project Empowerment through his correctional officer and say the program helped him the most with anger management and self-esteem. “When you come into a confrontation, they teach you how to handle it,” he said. “It made me believe there’s still some sort of future for me.” He now works as a cleaner working the overnight shift at Specialty Hospital in Southeast Washington.

¹⁸ See Charles Michalopoulos, “Does Making Work Pay Still Pay? An Update on the Effects of Four Earnings Supplement Programs on Employment, Earnings, and Income,” MDRC, 2005.

¹⁹ Dan Bloom, *Transitional Jobs: Background, Program Models, and Evaluation Evidence*, MDRC, May 2010.

²⁰ Roder and Elliott, op. cit.

portion of participants. Project Empowerment also plans to improve connections with halfway houses in near future, according to the program director.

Performance Measures and Outcomes

There is little publicly shared information on the success of Project Empowerment in helping residents secure unsubsidized employment, at increasing earnings, or in otherwise stabilizing very vulnerable residents. Until recently, Project Empowerment has not been subject to reporting requirements, and even the newly reported information fails to clarify how well the program is performing

The District has provided performance measures for Project Empowerment as part of its yearly budget submission, but it reported only on the share of participants who find unsubsidized jobs. Those reports indicate that roughly half of participants find a job.

More recently, the DC Council provided some additional information about the program as part of new reporting requirements for job training programs. The report identifies the share of workers who find an unsubsidized job and the share who keep the job for at least six months.

Yet the format of the reports is confusing and difficult to interpret. Moreover, the reports do not include wage information or job retention beyond six months.

Project Empowerment staff provided the following additional information for this report:

- The average starting wage for workers who found unsubsidized jobs was \$12.75.
- Roughly half of Project Empowerment participants find unsubsidized jobs. Of those who found jobs in 2014, about 70 percent kept a job for six months, and about 50 percent kept their job for least a year. These result are consistent with typical work experience programs sampled in a recent report, which showed 48 percent of participants found a job, and 64 percent kept a job for a year or more.²¹
- Project Empowerment may reduce recidivism. In response to a request, CSOSA reported that only 2 percent of Project Empowerment court supervised participants were incarcerated again in 2014, compared to 9 percent of the court supervised population outside the program.²²

Measuring Project Empowerment's Success	
Year	% of Participants Who Transition to Unsubsidized Employment
2006	42 percent
2007	61 percent
2008	45 percent
2009	Not available
2010	Not available
2011	62 percent
2012	57 percent
2013	51 percent
2014	54 percent (projected)

²¹ Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, *Apples to Apples: Making Data Work for Community-Based Workforce Development Programs*, May 2013, page 38, Table 5.

²² Information provided by Project Empowerment staff to DCFPI.

IV. Recommendations to Improve Project Empowerment

Subsidized jobs programs must be carefully designed and monitored to be as effective as possible. As Project Empowerment's program is only average compared with other programs nationally, DC should strengthen it to ensure it meets goals like reducing recidivism and helping more residents find permanent jobs.

Change relationships with private employers for at least some participants

Subsidized job placements are most effective when a worker is placed with a private sector employer who is able to expand their business with the subsidized worker and has the possibility of offering permanent, unsubsidized employment after the program ends. While most Project Empowerment participants are placed with private companies, the program should also start utilizing other features that improve results, such as requiring employers to put participants on the company payroll rather than having wages paid by the program.

Project Empowerment should also adopt other effective features, including paying only partial subsidies – rather than reimbursing wages fully – and phasing down subsidies over the course of the program. This approach helps ensure that workers will transition to an unsubsidized position. Moreover, partial or phased-down subsidies would allow Project Empowerment to serve more residents, compared to paying 100 percent of wages.

The District should also experiment with a hybrid approach. Some subsidized jobs programs start participants in a work exposure placement, often in a public agency or non-profit, with supportive services to address problems on the job.²³ Workers who perform well in this environment are then shifted to work with a private employer and placed directly on payroll for the remainder of their subsidy period.

Improve program design to serve returning citizens

If the District continues to view Project Empowerment as a way to help people struggling to find employment due to their criminal record, several modifications to the program should be made. For example, Project Empowerment could set aside more spots for residents coming straight from prison or a halfway house. These participants could be placed into the program immediately, without the usual requirement that participants look for work on their own for 30 days. Moreover, Project Empowerment should measure rates of recidivism among participants, so its effectiveness is clear.

Transitional Employment Participant: Sonja

Sonja worked as a clerk and clerk typist for a federal agency for a decade. She has a GED and has taken courses at the University of the District of Columbia, but in 2010, she served time at DC Jail for perjury in a case involving one of her children. Sonja heard about Project Empowerment through word of mouth, and received a job with a private employer for her six months as an office assistant. Unfortunately, she was not hired permanently and is now struggling to find work again. "It's hard out here if you have a record," she said. "I'm dying to work." She said that more computer training would assist her in her search for an administrative position.

²³ Testimony of Dan Bloom before the U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, July 30, 2014, op. cit.

Provide additional mentoring for workers during subsidized work experience to build soft skills

Project Empowerment should do more to provide participants with the “soft skills” needed to succeed. Participants have said that Project Empowerment helped them with conflict resolution, workplace behavior, and other “soft skills” that are key to retaining employment.²⁴

In a program conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor and Public/Private Ventures, formerly incarcerated adults participating in employment programs who received mentoring were less likely to leave the program, more likely to get a job, and less likely to return to prison.²⁵

Yet staffing for Project Empowerment may not be adequate to monitor participants and address worksite behavior issues that emerge. According to a DC Council report, the case management staff to participant ratio on FY 2014 was 57 to 1. The agency reported that the optimal ratio is 50 to 1. Adding more job coaches would help Project Empowerment build participants’ soft skills.

These staff also could provide support to participants after they receive unsubsidized employment. The Department of Employment Services’ five-year State Integrated Workforce Plan found that “securing unsubsidized work has proven to be more difficult because of employers’ reluctance to hire returning citizens as well as lack of full-range support for participants once unsubsidized employment is secured.”²⁶ This support might include continued mentoring and job coaching for participants, as well as computer and literacy training, child care subsidies, and subsidized transportation costs.

Improve connections with other job programs

Project Empowerment should coordinate better with other workforce programs. Only a small number of participants receive literacy help, and only a small number are referred to training programs. Some workers who complete Project Empowerment and fail to transition to an unsubsidized job, for example, may be good candidates for programs that provide skills training.

Project Empowerment should also use resources from the employment and training component of SNAP (formerly food stamps) to help pay for expenses such as transportation for recipients who also receive SNAP.

Solicit more feedback from employers

Project Empowerment surveys employers to assess their satisfaction with the program, and employers submit monthly progress reports. But the program could solicit more detailed feedback, such as whether or not participants were hired for unsubsidized employment, the factors in hiring, or why a participant was not hired.

²⁴ Roder, Anne, and Elliott, Mark. Economic Mobility Corp. Stimulating Opportunity: An Evaluation of ARRA-Funded Subsidized Employment Programs, September 2013, page 29.

²⁵ National Transitional Jobs Network. Tips for Working With Jobseekers Newly Released from Prison, December 2010.

²⁶ Department of Employment Services, District of Columbia State Integrated Workforce Plan, 2012-2016.

Create Clear Program Rules with Public Input

The Mayor and Council should develop a process that ensures that Project Empowerment's rules are clearly publicized, and ideally that solicits public input on major program changes. Project Empowerment's key features, such as providing bonuses for job retention, are currently set at the discretion of the Department of Employment services because the program is defined with little specificity in law, and there are no regulations or requirements to set program rules through a program plan. This means that there is no public input on how Project Empowerment operates and the program can change substantially without public input or even public notification. Clear publication of program rules and publication of an annual program plan would ensure that the public has a chance to shape how Project Empowerment operates and residents have a clear sense of how the program works.

v. Improve Data Collection

Project Empowerment should improve its data collection and analysis and share it with the public. The Department of Employment Services does not currently provide much information to the public on the performance of Project Empowerment. Project Empowerment staff provided data for this report, such as on one-year job retention rates, based on data that is available to Department of Employment Services but that has not been shared publicly.

Project Empowerment participant data is stored in the Virtual One-Stop System, VOSS, as well as a PeopleFirst case management system. Yet these systems do not fully capture key information, such as job retention, additional barriers to work, and criminal background.

Data collection and analysis has been a problem at the Department of Employment Services in the past. A 2013 DC auditor report on the agency found that the department did not have a management information system capable of assessing program performance, including:

- The total number of participants enrolled within each individual training and employment program;
- The total number of participants that dropped out of each individual training and employment program;
- The total number of jobs obtained once the training or employment program was completed;
- How long the participant retained that labor market employment;
- Whether a participant's employment skill set has increase or improved; and,
- The total amount of wage gain.²⁷

²⁷ Audit of the District's Workforce Development Programs, Office of the District of Columbia Auditor, February 22, 2013.

Specifically regarding Project Empowerment, a 2012 report to the DC Council stated, "...the way the program was run and has historically measured itself does not generate sufficient data to help inform future program enhancements. For example, since there is a rolling admissions and the program runs for six months, it is very difficult to capture measurable, useful data in the course of a fiscal year."²⁸

Moreover, a long-planned evaluation of Project Empowerment has not been conducted. The District of Columbia State Integrated Workforce Plan said that starting "no later than Program Year 2013, the WIC [Workforce Investment Council] and Department of Employment Services will evaluate the effectiveness of the Project Empowerment, and seek to identify potential reforms...." Yet no evaluation of Project Empowerment has been published by the WIC or Department of Employment Services.

Nevertheless, the Department of Employment Services was able to provide some information on Project Empowerment for this report. Using employer-reported data on unemployment insurance, the Department of Employment Services is able to identify the number of Project Empowerment recipients who find a job and the number who remain employed at various intervals, such as 6 months or one year. Project Empowerment also is able to obtain information from CSOSA on the recidivism rate of Project Empowerment participants who have a criminal record, although program staff had not analyzed this information prior to receiving requests for this paper.

In addition to collecting and reporting more detailed information on job retention and earnings, Project Empowerment should collect and report data on the criminal record of participants both before and after participating in the program. If Project Empowerment reduces recidivism substantially, that alone may justify maintaining or expanding the program.

²⁸ Department of Employment Services, District of Columbia State Integrated Workforce Plan 2012-2016.