



Promoting Opportunity

FINDINGS FROM THE STATE WORKFORCE POLICY INITIATIVE ON
EMPLOYMENT RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT

CAROL CLYMER, ANNE RODER AND BRANDON ROBERTS

P/PV

A PUBLICATION OF PUBLIC/PRIVATE VENTURES



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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Executive Summary

Public/Private Ventures launched the State Workforce Policy Initiative to determine how states would structure workforce development systems to alleviate poverty for the working poor in the wake of welfare reform. Working with the premise that although low-income individuals with limited work experience and skills may be able to obtain jobs, they could gain longer-term economic benefit from support to minimize barriers to steady employment and to seek advancement opportunities. P/PV used the initiative to explore the potential of retention and advancement strategies and stimulate state interest in associated policies. Five states were interested in this approach: Colorado, Florida, Oklahoma, Oregon and Washington. From 1998 to 2002, P/PV and these states worked together to: 1) incorporate retention and advancement strategies into local workforce development efforts, and 2) strengthen state workforce policies to support retention and advancement activities.

Altogether, the retention and advancement efforts of ten local programs were supported and studied. Some of these programs were new initiatives while others added retention and advancement activities to preexisting training and employment programs. The states involved in the Initiative shared a common interest in the potential benefits of retention and advancement. Each state, however, had a different level of experience, commitment and openness to exploring how state policies might be changed and strengthened.

METHODS

Throughout the initiative, P/PV made several visits to each local area to document the development of programs and interview staff and participants; we also met with state officials to discuss policy implications. To understand the potential of the initiative to benefit low-income workers, we examined the relationship between program participation and individuals' outcomes, using data from interviews conducted with participants when they enrolled in the program and again 12 months later. These interviews gathered information about changes in participants' employment, earnings, educational attainment, public assistance receipt and household income. We also collected data from the local programs on participants' receipt of program services.

KEY FINDINGS

The evidence suggests that retention and advancement programs can contribute to improved employment outcomes for low-income workers. We first examined participants' employment and other outcomes during the year after they entered the programs and found that participants experienced several positive changes, including:

- ◆ During the year after entering the program, participants worked more than a month longer and earned \$2,491 more, on average, than they did during the year before starting the program.
- ◆ Forty-two percent of participants had an increase in hourly wages of \$1 or more during the year after starting the program.
- ◆ Sixty-three percent of participants had jobs with medical benefits a year after entering the program—a 34 percent increase over the number who did so at their most recent job prior to starting the program.
- ◆ The percent of individuals living in households with income below the federal poverty line decreased from 52 percent in the month before entering the program to 39 percent one year later, a 25 percent decrease.

We then explored how program participation interacted with participants' employment outcomes. We found that higher levels of participation in retention and advancement activities and participating in programs with pre-employment training were associated with positive employment outcomes. Overall, we observed:

- ◆ The length of time in a program—receiving services for at least six months—was associated with working more months, working full time and having higher annual earnings.
- ◆ The intensity of program services—averaging three or more contacts with program staff per month—was associated with having an increase in wages of \$1 or more per hour, working full time and having health benefits.
- ◆ Participating in pre-employment training was associated with earning higher hourly wages one year after entering the program.

We examined participation levels across local programs and found significant variation. Three programs—Families in Touch (FIT) in Miami, Up With Wages in Salem and Step Ahead North in Portland—had higher rates of participation in program services than did the others, even after controlling for differences in participants’ background characteristics. These programs incorporated three common elements in their retention strategies that we believe helped increase participation rates and thus have the potential to help improve employment outcomes for program participants. The elements are:

- ◆ A defined retention and advancement program structure;
- ◆ Activities to address challenges and opportunities as they arise; and
- ◆ Consistent incentives for participation.

The programs incorporated these elements into three different retention and advancement strategies overall. One site provided post-employment workshops that were routine and structured, another focused individual and group assistance on income-improvement plans for employed individuals and the third provided pre-employment skills training with structured post-employment activities. Although structures differed, each program offered a number of opportunities for participants to increase their knowledge of appropriate work behavior, explore career interests and deal with challenges associated with work and home. Programs also rewarded participants’ accomplishments with incentives. Their different approaches suggest that employment and training organizations interested in providing retention and advancement strategies have a variety of options to consider.

While most states’ officials seemed genuinely interested in supporting and learning from local efforts, only those in three—Florida, Oregon and Washington—took important steps to incorporate retention and advancement strategies into their workforce development policies. By 2004, only Florida maintained a solid commitment to the issue.

CONCLUSIONS

Although implementation of retention and advancement strategies is challenging and more research regarding effective practices needs to be completed, the results of the initiative suggest that investing in retention and advancement strategies is viable and has the potential to benefit low-income workers. Our documentation of participant, program and policy outcomes throughout the initiative provides information and ideas for state and local officials to consider should they be interested in refining welfare reform and workforce development systems to help the working poor augment their income.

A Window of Opportunity

For social policy in the United States, 1996 was a watershed. Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, dramatically changing the nature of welfare by limiting the length of time individuals could receive benefits. The act also gave states considerable authority and flexibility to determine how to get people to work and increase their economic self-sufficiency.

To understand the effects of this momentous change, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) began to investigate how states would structure workforce development systems to alleviate poverty for the working poor. We wondered how governors would use their new authority over federal block grants for social programs and what would happen in the proposed restructuring of federally supported employment and training programs. Sweeping workforce development reform seemed inevitable.

P/PV's initial investigation involved talking with social services and workforce development officials in 13 states. The report on our early reconnaissance, *What's Next After Work First* (Elliott et al. 1998), speaks to the challenges states faced as they implemented welfare reform. While they toiled with the exigencies of reform, they understood that many low-income individuals would need help, such as training, subsidized work and post-employment support services, to be successful in the labor market. At that time, it seemed likely that states would develop stronger workforce development systems by offering employment retention and advancement services to help individuals maintain steady employment, increase earnings and move toward economic self-sufficiency.¹

In 1998, when P/PV launched the State Workforce Policy Initiative to explore policies and strategies to help low-income individuals gain skills needed to maintain steady employment and advance at work, the economy was robust and the labor market tight. Most individuals were able to find employment on their own. As fewer individuals applied for welfare and many left the rolls, surpluses of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds accumulated in many states (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means 2004). These were unprecedented circumstances: legislation that gave states considerable latitude with the expenditure of welfare funds; the availability of jobs; and ample resources to restructure workforce development systems for the working poor. Under these conditions, we expected to find several states implementing employment retention and advancement strategies through state welfare-to-work or workforce development systems.

We were wrong. "Work first" strategies became the dominant workforce development approach in 1998. Success with moving individuals from welfare to work was easier to achieve in a booming economy. Since financial incentives were attached to caseload reduction and the welfare time clock was ticking, many states and local areas focused on job search and placement activities only.

Still, P/PV did not want to miss an opportunity. We believed that rapid attachment to the labor market, by itself, was unlikely to help individuals maintain steady employment and

increase earnings. And because “work first” did not address the need for skilled workers, we believed that a few states would think ahead by focusing on strategies to involve employers in helping low-wage workers increase skills while on the job. We also thought some states would recognize the rare opportunity to create programs for employment retention and advancement, two key ways to facilitate economic self-sufficiency.

P/PV adopted the premise that although low-income individuals with limited work experience and skills may be able to obtain jobs, they could gain longer-term economic benefit from retention- and advancement-focused support. We therefore used the initiative to stimulate state interest and explore the potential of various retention and advancement strategies. Five states were interested in our approach and joined the initiative: Colorado, Florida, Oklahoma, Oregon and Washington. From 1998 to 2002, P/PV and these states worked together to incorporate retention and advancement strategies into local efforts and to strengthen state policies to support these efforts.

Through the initiative, P/PV studied 10 local retention and advancement programs. Some programs were entirely new; others added retention and advancement activities to preexisting training and employment services. While the states shared a common interest in the potential benefits of retention and advancement, each had a different level of experience, commitment and openness to exploring how its policies might be changed and strengthened.

In 2001, P/PV reported on several states that made retention and advancement key components of their workforce development systems. In that report, *States of Change* (Clymer et al. 2001)², we cited efforts in Florida, Oregon and Washington, as well as in a handful of other states not participating in our initiative. The report concluded that “even in states that have made retention and advancement a priority, progress has been slow and implementation uneven.”

Promoting Opportunity, our final report on the initiative, highlights local programs and related state policy efforts. The report gives particular attention to findings on 477 individuals who participated in the 10 local programs, describing changes that occurred in their lives during the year after they entered the program and discussing the extent to which program participation may have contributed to these changes. The report also explores ways that states and local programs may be able to strengthen retention and advancement efforts to foster longer-term labor market success for low-income individuals.

METHODS

Throughout the four-year initiative, P/PV made several visits to each local area to document the development of programs and interview staff and participants. We also interviewed state officials to discuss policy implications. To learn about changes in participants’ lives, we interviewed them when they enrolled in the program and again 12 months later. We also collected data from the local areas on participants’ receipt of program services.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings presented in this report include positive outcomes for participants, salient lessons for program implementation and implications for state policy. Overall, participants in the states' programs experienced several positive changes during the year after enrollment. Participants worked more than a month longer and had \$2,491 more in annual earnings, on average, than they did during the year before starting the program. The percentage of participants who had medical benefits available through their employer increased by a third. On the other hand, while the percent living in households with income below poverty decreased 25 percent, nearly 4 in 10 participants remained poor.

To understand the potential of retention and advancement programs to benefit low-income workers, we examined the relationship between program participation and individuals' outcomes. The evidence suggests that participation in retention and advancement services is related to positive employment outcomes. Receiving program services for six months or more and averaging three or more contacts with program staff per month were positively related to increased employment, hourly wages and annual earnings. Participating in pre-employment training was also associated with earning higher hourly wages.

Based on these findings and our observations of program implementation, we identified several key program characteristics that may contribute to positive employment outcomes:

- ◆ A defined retention and advancement program structure;
- ◆ Activities to address challenges and opportunities as they arise; and
- ◆ Consistent incentives for participation.

Despite promising findings at the program level, development of state policies to support retention and advancement strategies was limited. While most states' officials seemed genuinely interested in supporting and learning from local efforts, only those in three—Florida, Oregon and Washington—took meaningful steps to incorporate retention and advancement strategies into their workforce development policies. By 2004, only Florida maintained a solid commitment to the issue, and at the local level, only two of the programs we studied were still operating—both in Oregon.

We conclude that to help low-income workers achieve greater success in the labor market, investments in workforce development systems, programs and services that lead to steady employment, advancement and, therefore, increased earnings are needed. Although implementation of retention and advancement strategies is challenging and more research regarding effective strategies needs to be completed, the results of the initiative point to promising practices that have the potential to benefit low-income workers.

THE REPORT'S STRUCTURE

Promoting Opportunity provides a detailed discussion of our results and suggestions for state and local policymakers interested in strengthening employment retention and advancement services. The Strategies and Services section outlines the program models used in each state, the services offered by local programs and the characteristics of program participants. Participants' Experiences describes changes the participants experienced and how program participation was associated with these changes. Local Program Efforts chronicles strengths and challenges of program implementation. Efforts to Develop and Strengthen State Policies discusses the policy actions states took during the initiative. In Concluding Comments we provide suggestions for future action.

Strategies and Services

P/PV engaged a lead organization in each of the five states to participate in the initiative. In each lead agency, a senior official assumed responsibility for the state’s involvement, including the selection and funding of local programs.³ Three states chose to include two local areas. A total of 10 local programs were studied.

HOW PROGRAMS WERE STRUCTURED

P/PV left the design of specific strategies to each state and local area, which resulted in several program models. Some areas chose to provide pre-employment training as part of their strategy, followed by job placement, counseling and case management services (hereafter referred to as “programs with pre-employment training”). Other local areas focused mainly on post-employment activities by recruiting individuals already working and providing workshops and counseling to help them stay employed and advance (hereafter referred to as “post-employment-focused programs”). Workshops in post-employment-focused programs were offered either weekly, biweekly or monthly and covered topics such as workplace communication, stress management, career planning and money management. Several programs helped participants enroll in training while they were working, recognizing that many low-income individuals need to work and cannot afford to spend significant time in pre-employment training. Turn to the chart on pages 6 and 7 for more information about the program models implemented during the initiative.

Table 1
Primary Services Offered by Local Programs

Program	State	Primary Pre-Employment Services	Primary Post-Employment Services
Transformations	CO	Occupational skills training	Case management
Families in Touch	FL		Weekly workshops and peer support
Universal Studios Retention Program	FL		Case management
IndEx	OK	Simulated work experience and occupational skills training	Case management
Step Ahead North	OR	Occupational skills training	Case management
Step Ahead East	OR		Subsidized work experience and case management
Up With Wages Public Sector	OR		Individual coaching and workshops
Up With Wages Private Sector	OR		Individual coaching and workshops
Ladders	WA	Occupational skills and employability training	Case management
Linkages	WA		Occupational skills training and case management

Retention and Advancement Program Descriptions

Colorado

State Sponsor: State Workforce Coordinating Council⁴

Local Sponsor: Higher Education Advanced Training (HEAT) Center, Denver

Program: Transformations

As part of the Colorado Community College Occupational and Education System, the HEAT Center developed Transformations, a program designed to introduce underemployed women to technical employment and educational opportunities leading to family-sustaining wages. The program targeted technologies associated with high-growth sectors in Colorado, such as manufacturing, information technology, biotechnology and telecommunications.

Transformations was a 20-week program to build skills in technical literacy, applied mathematics, physics and communications. Participants attended classes five hours per day, Monday through Friday. The program also provided post-employment services such as individual counseling, monthly group sessions, computer training and access to continuing education. Four Transformations program cycles were completed during the initiative.

Type: Program with Pre-Employment Training

Florida

State Sponsor: State Work and Gain Economic Self-Sufficiency (WAGES)⁵

Local Sponsor: Human Services Coalition of Dade County, Miami

Program: Families in Touch (FIT)

FIT targeted newly hired individuals in Miami-Dade County who were receiving TANF or who had recently left the welfare rolls yet were still eligible for transitional benefits. The program provided support services to participants who attended weekly two-hour sessions that met for a year. Activities included personal development and support counseling, civic education, career education and career advancement, and other services designed to improve the life skills and self-confidence, career aspirations and industry-related skills of participants. After two years, the coalition sponsored eight FIT groups in six Miami neighborhoods, some of the most impoverished in the country.

Type: Post-Employment-Focused Program

Local Sponsor: Lockheed Martin, Orlando

Program: Universal Studios Retention Program

Working with job seekers moving from welfare to work, Lockheed Martin provided post-employment services to individuals they placed at Universal Studios Theme Park. Located at the worksite, a case manager provided job coaching, emergency support and assistance, and help accessing the Universal Studios Career Pathways program for job advancement.

Type: Post-Employment-Focused Program

Oklahoma

State Sponsor: Governor's Office

Local Sponsor: Tulsa Chamber of Commerce

Program: IndEx

IndEx was an employer-driven workforce development approach designed to promote both welfare reform and economic development. IndEx contracted with local companies to perform light manufacturing and product assembly in an industrial facility that also included classroom space and a computer lab. Participants were enrolled for up to six months and worked 40 hours a week for a stipend. Their eight-hour day was evenly divided between working on the shop floor and honing skills through a variety of activities that included employability workshops, computer-assisted instruction in basic skills and GED, and routine performance evaluations.

IndEx was designed to serve disadvantaged adults, including welfare recipients, residents of subsidized housing and out-of-school youth. Most faced multiple barriers to employment and advancement—they lacked basic skills, had not earned a high school diploma or GED, had limited work experience and/or had recently been incarcerated.

Type: Program with Pre-Employment Training

Oregon

State Sponsor: Department of Human Services, Adult and Family Services (AFS)⁶

Local Sponsor: Mt. Hood and Portland Community Colleges and the Regional AFS Office, Portland

Program: Step Ahead North

The Step Ahead North program included six weeks of clerical skills training; individualized support and follow-up counseling and services; individual development accounts to help participants upgrade their skills after they got jobs; and career counseling to encourage and help participants access continuing education and advance on the job. If a participant's employer did not have a position for advancement within the first year on the job, staff members helped the individual find other higher-wage employment.

Type: Program with Pre-Employment Training

Program: Step Ahead East

Step Ahead East added intensive post-employment services to JOBS Plus, Oregon's subsidized employment program. Once participants were ready for unsubsidized employment, retention specialists helped them find jobs and provided continued career development, case management and job replacement services. Participants also received individual development accounts.

Type: Post-Employment-Focused Program

Local Sponsor: Chemeketa Community College and the Regional AFS Office, Salem

Program: Up With Wages Public and Private

This effort targeted entry-level state employees, many of whom were single parents, and private-sector workers in industries with little career potential. Many participants were former welfare clients who were placed in jobs by the regional AFS office; others were entry-level workers who found jobs on their own. In both cases, participants needed additional skills and assistance to advance.

Services included weekly on-the-job coaching and training; regular follow-up assistance with personal problems; customized and individually delivered occupational training; special seminars to improve work skills such as communication on the job and team building; referrals; and financial assistance for college courses.

Type: Post-Employment-Focused Program

Washington

State Sponsor: State Board of Community and Technical Colleges

Local Sponsor: Shoreline Community College

Program: Ladders

The Ladders program targeted low-income participants for a three-step career advancement strategy in manufacturing, customer service, information technology and health care. The strategy involved 11 weeks of industry-specific, pre-employment training, employability development and career counseling; individual training plans; support services; assisted job search, placement and retention services; and tuition assistance for enrollment in training classes to enable participants to advance.

Type: Program with Pre-Employment Training

Local Sponsor: Walla Walla Community College

Program: Linkages

The Linkages program provided career planning and retention services, access to support services and continuing education, and help finding jobs with advancement potential. Participants were recruited primarily from case managers in the local Department of Social and Health Services.

Type: Post-Employment-Focused Program

The local programs employed a variety of services to help individuals maintain employment and advance to better jobs. Table 1 on page 5 provides a summary of the primary services provided in each program.

While all the programs offered a range of services, their success in engaging participants in each type of service varied. Table 2 below presents participation rates for the primary services offered by local programs. The most commonly used service across both programs with pre-employment training and post-employment-focused programs was individual counseling. Workshops or peer group sessions saw higher participation rates in the post-employment-focused programs, where these activities tended to be more structured.

Table 2
Percentage of Participants Who Received Different Services

	All participants (n=687)	Participants in programs with pre-employment training (n=292)	Participants in post-employment- focused programs (n=395)
Individual case management/counseling	90%	85%	94%
Pre-employment occupational skills training	42%	100%	0%
Workshops or peer group sessions	40%	22%	53%
Post-employment skills upgrade training	39%	45%	35%
Employability training	14%	31%	1%

Source: P/PV analysis of participation data collected from the programs for the 687 people who enrolled in the initiative between October 1998 and May 2000.

WHO PROGRAMS SERVED

All 10 programs were designed to serve low-income individuals with limited work histories, education and skills. Program planners targeted this population because they believed retention and advancement strategies would make a significant difference in their lives, propelling them toward more consistent work and better-paying positions. In general, programs were successful at reaching this targeted population.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Across all programs, the majority of participants were women and more than half were racial or ethnic minorities. Almost all of the participants in the post-employment-focused programs were women (Table 3); these programs primarily served current or former welfare recipients and low-wage workers in clerical and retail positions. The majority of male participants were in two programs that offered training for positions in manufacturing.

Table 3
Demographic Characteristics of Initiative Participants

	All programs (n=477)	Programs with pre-employment training (n=201)	Post-employment- focused programs (n=276)
Gender			
Female	86%	72%	97%
Male	14%	28%	3%
Race/Ethnicity			
White	42%	39%	44%
Black/African American	32%	28%	36%
Hispanic	8%	7%	9%
Asian	4%	7%	1%
Other	14%	20%	10%
Age			
Age 18 to 24	29%	31%	28%
Age 25 to 39	46%	44%	47%
Age 40 and above	25%	25%	25%
Average Age	32	32	32
Highest Degree Earned			
None	20%	25%	17%
GED	21%	21%	21%
High school diploma	50%	46%	54%
Associate's degree or higher	9%	9%	8%
Ever Received TANF Since 1996	52%	36%	64%
Single Parent Household With Children Under Age 18	43%	27%	54%
Household At or Below Poverty	52%	58%	47%

Source: P/PV analysis of baseline survey data for the 477 people who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.

When they entered the programs, the average age among all participants was 32 years. Most participants had either a high school diploma or GED and almost half had a vocational or technical certificate, but very few held a two- or four-year college degree. Participants entering pre-employment training programs were somewhat less likely to have a high school diploma than were those enrolling in post-employment programs.

PARTICIPANTS' RECENT WORK EXPERIENCE WAS ERRATIC AND EARNINGS WERE LOW

Almost all participants had worked in a full-time job at some point, but many had limited work experience or recent spells of unemployment. A quarter of participants had never held a full-time job for at least one year (Table 4). Nearly two thirds were unemployed for some part of the year prior to enrollment. While just over a third of all participants, and half of those in post-employment programs, had worked during all 12 months of the year before joining the programs, their earnings remained low. Low wages and a lack of benefits made these individuals suitable candidates for the programs.

Among participants who worked during the year before entering the programs, hourly wages were low and the jobs often unstable. Almost half of participants had more than one job during the year—either moving from job to job or working in multiple jobs at the same time. Median hourly wages at the most recent job were \$7.62. Forty percent of participants worked part-time at their most recent job, and more than half (54%) did not have medical benefits available through their employer. Nearly half (47%) of participants attributed the difficulty they faced in getting a good job in part to a lack of skills.

Table 4
Work Experience Prior to Program Entry

	All programs (n=477)	Programs with pre-employment training (n=201)	Post-employment- focused programs (n=276)
Longest Full-Time Job Ever			
Less than 1 year	25%	29%	22%
1 to 2 years	37%	31%	41%
3 or more years	38%	40%	37%
Number of Months Employed During the Year Prior to Program Entry			
None	12%	23%	5%
1 to 6 months	25%	32%	20%
7 to 11 months	26%	27%	25%
All 12 months	36%	18%	50%
Employed at Program Entry	63%	33%	85%
Number of Jobs During the Year Prior to Program Entry*			
1 job	51%	52%	50%
2 jobs	30%	27%	32%
3 or more jobs	19%	21%	18%
Median Hourly Wage at Most Recent Job at Program Entry (2001 Dollars)*			
	\$7.62	\$7.60	\$7.63

Source: P/PV analysis of baseline survey data for the 477 people who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.
* Among participants who worked during the year.

Participants entering programs with pre-employment training had more limited recent work experience than those in programs targeting participants already employed. A greater percentage of participants entering training programs were not employed at all during the year before starting the program and many fewer worked during all 12 months, as illustrated in Table 4.

PARTICIPANTS HAD MANY BARRIERS TO STEADY EMPLOYMENT

In addition to limited work histories and skills, participants faced many other barriers to keeping or advancing in a job. Common barriers were securing child care or transportation, the health problems of family members and language barriers (Table 5).

Many participants needed reliable child care to retain a job; 74 percent of all participants lived with their own children under age 18, and 45 percent lived with children younger than 6.

Almost half of the participants had no other adults living in their households. A much higher percentage of participants who headed single-parent households were in programs without pre-employment training, which is indicative of these participants' need to work and the difficulty they face in obtaining additional skills or education.

Nearly one third of participants had been homeless at some time. About a quarter said they had a health problem that limited the amount or kind of work they could do. Few participants said that drug or alcohol abuse was a very important barrier, though some may have been reluctant to mention such abuse.

Table 5
Barriers to Employment

	Percent who reported that barrier was very important
Lack of skills	47%
Securing child care	29%
Transportation	28%
Health problems of family members	22%
Language	13%
Drug or alcohol abuse	8%

Source: P/PV analysis of baseline survey data for the 477 people who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.

PARTICIPANTS LIVED IN LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

Participants' median household income in the month before entering the programs, including earnings and government assistance, totaled \$1,596.⁷ More than half (52%) were living in households with incomes below the federal poverty line. The poverty rate was higher among participants entering programs with pre-employment training (58%) than among those entering post-employment-focused programs (47%), due largely to the fact that fewer training participants were working when they came to the programs. Many participants relied on public assistance to supplement their income at the time they enrolled in the programs (Table 6). Participants had few assets, and their median net worth—the difference between the value of their assets and their debts—was negative (–\$106). Table 6 presents participants' most commonly held assets and debts.

Table 6
Public Assistance Receipt, Assets and Debts
in the Month Prior to Enrollment

Public Assistance	
Received TANF/welfare	23%
Received food stamps or WIC ⁸	52%
Lived in public housing	34%
Assets	
Savings or checking account	54%
Automobile	47%
Home	9%
Debts	
Credit card debt	41%
Educational loans	27%
Automobile loans	22%
Other debt (e.g., overdue utility bills and medical bills)	47%

Source: P/PV analysis of baseline survey data for the 477 people who completed both the baseline and follow-up surveys.

LOCAL PROGRAMS DEVELOPED A VARIETY OF STRATEGIES AND REACHED THE TARGETED POPULATIONS

In sum, each local program was able to develop and implement retention services, and several offered advancement services. The duration and frequency of retention and advancement services varied greatly. The one service offered consistently across programs with pre-employment training and post-employment-focused programs was individual counseling on issues related to obtaining, retaining or advancing in a job. Several programs also offered either weekly or monthly workshops covering a range of work-related skills and personal development topics. Local programs were successful in reaching their targeted low-income populations. Participants' histories of inconsistent work and low wages suggested that they could benefit from services aimed at promoting employment retention and advancement to better-paying positions.

Participants' Experiences

The evaluation of the State Workforce Policy Initiative sought to explore the potential of retention and advancement strategies to help low-income workers maintain steady employment and advance in their jobs, leading to increased earnings and an improved standard of living. Research has shown that welfare recipients who find jobs lose them quickly, often in the first four to six months and 75 percent within one year (Rangarajan 1998). The initiative presumed that inexperienced workers would benefit from having a staff member or peer to talk to about problems at work or home, and that the programs would connect participants to important services, including child care and transportation. In addition, the programs that provided pre-employment training thought new skills would allow participants to get higher-quality jobs that in turn would lead to better retention.

At the start of the initiative, the local programs were developing new strategies, making adjustments as needed along the way, and were uncertain about how many people they could recruit. Little was known at the time about how best to implement retention and advancement strategies (Strawn 1998). Therefore, P/PV believed a rigorous evaluation employing a control group was premature. The lack of a control group makes determining the benefits of program participation difficult due to the numerous factors that can influence people's employment outcomes, including their backgrounds and motivation as well as changes in the economy. To understand the programs' potential to benefit low-income workers, we interviewed participants when they enrolled in the programs and approximately one year later to learn about their employment, earnings, educational attainment, public assistance receipt and household income. Using data collected from the programs about the services participants received, we then explored whether varying types or amounts of participation were positively associated with participants' employment outcomes, controlling for differences in participant characteristics and in the local economies. Our analysis sought to answer such questions as:

- ◆ Is the duration of participation or intensity of contact with the program associated with employment outcomes?
- ◆ Is participating in a program with a pre-employment training component associated with employment outcomes?
- ◆ Do the effects of program type, duration or frequency differ for participants with various characteristics or barriers to work?

We believed that receiving services for longer periods of time and having more frequent contact with the program would be positively associated with employment outcomes because higher levels of contact would foster strong relationships, allowing staff members to help participants build their self-confidence and deal with workplace or family problems. It is important to note, however, that the relationships examined in this report between the amount or type of participation and participants' employment outcomes

indicate only that there is an association between the two; they do not prove cause and effect. (See Appendix A for a more complete discussion of the methodology.)

This chapter first describes how participants' employment and other outcomes changed during the year after they entered the programs; it then explores how program participation interacted with participants' employment outcomes.

PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED POSITIVE CHANGES

MOST PARTICIPANTS WORKED MORE MONTHS AND EARNED HIGHER WAGES

On average, participants were employed during nine months out of the year after entering the programs, an increase of 1.3 months, or 17 percent (Table 7), over the year before they entered the programs. Half of participants were employed during all 12 months.

Table 7
Participants' Labor Market Experience

	Year after program entry	Percent change from year before program entry
Ever employed during year	91%	+3%
Average months employed	9.0	+17%
Worked during all 12 months	50%	+39%
Median annual earnings* (all participants)	\$13,972	+39%
Median annual earnings* (workers only)	\$14,901	+28%
Median hourly wage at current or most recent job*	\$8.52	+12%
Current or most recent job is full-time	70%	+17%
Current or most recent job offers health benefits	63%	+34%

Source: P/PV analysis of baseline and follow-up survey data collected from 1998 through 2001.

** Earnings and hourly wages are in 2001 dollars.*

Participants' hourly wages also increased, with a median wage at their current or most recent job of \$8.52, a 12 percent difference. Among participants who worked during the years before and after entering the programs, hourly wages increased by an average of 81 cents, or 10 percent. The average increase was significantly greater among participants enrolled in programs with pre-employment training (\$1.37) than among those enrolled in post-employment-focused programs (46 cents).

Forty-two percent of participants experienced a \$1 or more increase in their hourly wages during the year after starting the programs. Previous research has found that changing jobs is associated with wage gains for low-skill workers (Strawn 2001; Gladden, Taber 1999),

and this was true for the initiative participants as well. Among participants who worked, 55 percent had one job and 45 percent had multiple jobs during the year after entering the programs. Just more than half (53%) who had multiple jobs had an increase in hourly wages of \$1 or more compared to about a third (34%) of those who had one job.

One year after entering the programs, 70 percent of the participants worked full-time in their current or most recent job, a 17 percent increase. Nearly two thirds had medical benefits available through their employer, a 34 percent increase. Half of the participants had sick leave.

ANNUAL EARNINGS GREW BUT REMAINED LOW

The combination of participants working more months, working more hours per week and earning higher hourly wages resulted in greater annual earnings. Among participants who worked during the years before and after entering the programs, annual earnings increased an average of \$2,491, or 20 percent. The participants who enrolled in programs with pre-employment training experienced a greater increase in annual earnings (\$4,858) than those in post-employment programs (\$1,193) because they obtained higher-wage jobs and significantly increased the amount of time they worked. Because most participants in post-employment programs were working when they started, smaller increases would be expected, but the 9 percent increase they recorded still outstripped the 3 to 4 percent increase for the general civilian population.⁹ Despite these gains, annual earnings remained low. Median annual earnings among all participants who worked during the year after entering the programs were \$14,901.

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE DECLINED

One year after entering the programs, fewer participants received public assistance, though many continued to rely on food stamps and public housing. TANF receipt decreased from 23 to 12 percent, mirroring the declines in welfare caseloads across the country during the study period (Table 8). We found that increases in participants' earnings from work were associated with decreases in income received from TANF, although we cannot establish cause and effect.¹⁰ The percentage of participants receiving child care assistance declined from 22 to 14 percent, and the percent receiving a transportation stipend dropped from 7 to 3 percent. There was only a slight increase in the percentage of participants receiving child support (from 14 to 16 percent). Forty percent of participants said they received the Earned Income Tax Credit during the year after starting the programs, an increase from about 35 percent.

THE POVERTY RATE DROPPED

One year after entering the programs, participants' median monthly household income, including earnings from work, government assistance and other sources, totaled \$1,864. Earnings from employment made up 73 percent of total household income at the time of the follow-up interview—an increase from 62 percent at the time of program entry. Overall, the poverty rate dropped from 52 to 39 percent,

Table 8
Participants' Receipt of Income Supports

	Received one year after program entry	Percent change from status at program entry
Food stamps	42%	-20%
EITC	40%	+14%
Public housing	33%	-3%
Child care assistance	14%	-36%
TANF	12%	-48%
Transportation stipend	3%	-57%

Source: P/PV analysis of baseline and follow-up survey data collected from 1998 through 2001.

a 25 percent decrease. The poverty rate decreased the most among the group of participants in programs with pre-employment training—falling from 58 percent to 35 percent—while participants in post-employment-focused programs saw a more modest decrease from 47 to 43 percent.

ASSETS INCREASED AND DEBTS DECREASED

Participants experienced some change in the assets and debts they held one year after program enrollment. Just more than half (53%) of participants owned an automobile, an increase of 13 percent. About 6 in 10 participants (61%) had a savings or checking account, also an increase of 13 percent. The rate of home ownership remained the same at 9 percent. A greater number of participants had an automobile loan (27%), but fewer had education loans (23%). The number who had credit card debt remained the same, but fewer participants had other debts such as overdue utility bills and medical bills (down from 47 percent to 36 percent), suggesting that some participants used their increased earnings to pay down outstanding debts. Median net worth among all participants was \$0, rising slightly.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROGRAM PARTICIPATION AND CHANGES IN PARTICIPANTS' EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS

Our research showed that program participants worked more consistently and earned greater hourly wages during the year after enrolling in the initiative's programs. Our next task was to determine whether the changes observed in participants' employment and earnings were associated with program participation.¹¹

We first examined what levels of participation were associated with changes in employment outcomes, considering both duration and frequency of contact. We found that receiving at least six months of service and averaging at least three contacts per month were significant. The following sections explore how participation in initiative programs is related to changes in employment retention, hourly wages, full-time work and annual earnings.

PARTICIPATION WAS ASSOCIATED WITH INCREASES IN EMPLOYMENT...

We found that participants who received services for six months or more were more likely to work during the year after entering the programs and more likely to work during at least nine months of that year.¹² About 7 in 10 participants who received services for six months or more worked during at least nine months of the year after program entry, compared with 57 percent of those who received services for a shorter period.¹³ Ninety-seven percent of participants who received services for six months or more worked during the year after entry, compared with 90 percent of participants who received services for a shorter period. In addition, those who averaged three or more contacts with staff per month also worked more, but this relationship was not statistically significant for the group as a whole. Table 9 illustrates these differences.

Table 9
Relationship Between Participation and Employment Retention*

	Received services for 6 or more months	Received services for fewer than 6 months
Ever worked during the year after program entry	97%	90%
Worked during at least 9 months of the year year after program entry	71%	57%

*Based on statistical analysis of the baseline and follow-up surveys.

...AND WITH BEING EMPLOYED IN HIGHER-QUALITY JOBS

One year after enrollment, participants who received services for six months or more and those who averaged three or more contacts per month were more likely to work full time at their current or most recent job.¹⁴ Participants who had an average of three or more contacts per month were also more likely to have a wage increase of \$1 per hour or more during the year after entering the programs and to have health insurance available at their current or most recent job.¹⁵

Table 10
Relationship Between Participation and Job Quality*

	Averaged 3 or more contacts per month	Averaged fewer than 3 contacts per month
Had a wage increase of \$1 or more per hour after program entry	64%	43%
	Received services for 6 or more months	Received services for fewer than 6 months
Worked full time at current or most recent job	70%	51%

*Based on statistical analysis of the baseline and follow-up surveys.

Table 10 illustrates the relationship between participation and the quality of participants' current or most recent job. Almost two thirds of participants who averaged three or more contacts with staff per month received a wage increase of \$1 or more per hour, compared with 43 percent of those who averaged fewer contacts. Seven in 10 participants who received services for six months or more worked full time, compared with half of those who received services for a shorter time.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRAINING WAS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER WAGES

A primary goal of the programs that provided pre-employment training was to give participants skills that would allow them to obtain and retain better-paying jobs. One year after program entry, we found that participants who enrolled in programs with pre-employment training earned higher hourly wages at their current or most recent job, as illustrated in Table 11.¹⁶

Table 11
Relationship Between Type of Program and Hourly Wages*

	In a program with pre-employment training	In a post-employment-focused program
Hourly wage at current or most recent job	\$9.96 (completers) \$9.00 (noncompleters) ¹⁷	\$7.85

*Based on statistical analysis of the baseline and follow-up surveys.

PARTICIPATION WAS ASSOCIATED WITH GREATER ANNUAL EARNINGS

Participants who received services for six months or more had higher annual earnings in the year after entering the programs. As illustrated in Table 12, they earned an average of \$13,700, 18 percent more than those who received services for less time.

Table 12
Relationship Between Participation and Annual Earnings*

	Received services for 6 or more months	Received services for fewer than 6 months
Annual earnings during the year after program entry	\$13,700	\$11,576

*Based on statistical analysis of the baseline and follow-up surveys.

OUTCOMES VARIED DEPENDING ON BARRIERS

We examined whether the relationships between program participation and employment outcomes differed for subgroups of participants with various barriers to work, including education, limited work experience, health problems, a lack of supportive adults, homelessness, a lack of skills, transportation, the need for child care, language problems and drug or alcohol abuse. To the extent that the relationships among subgroups differ from the relationships found among all participants, we can learn lessons about the types of people who may be well or poorly suited to retention and advancement services.

Our findings varied depending on the specific barriers in question. Among participants who had limited previous work experience and among those who said they lacked the skills needed to get a good job, higher levels of program participation were associated with working more months during the year after enrollment.¹⁸ Conversely, greater program participation was associated with working fewer months among participants who said drug or alcohol problems were a barrier and among those who had been homeless. We did not find statistically significant relationships between the level of service and employment outcomes among participants who received TANF in the month prior to program entry or among participants for whom health problems, a lack of supportive adults, transportation, child care or language were barriers. We caution that our analysis was limited by the small number of people in our sample who faced each of these barriers; with more people, the analysis may have resulted in a greater number of statistically significant relationships.

PARTICIPATION VARIED ACROSS PROGRAMS

The programs implemented a wide range of strategies offering varying combinations and types of services. Beyond the distinction between programs providing pre-employment training and those focused entirely on post-employment services, the programs do not lend themselves to being grouped by strategy. In addition, the programs tended to serve small numbers of people, which prevents us from conducting meaningful analyses of how participant outcomes varied by site.

We did examine whether participation rates varied across local programs. Across all programs, 61 percent of participants received services for six months or more and 31 percent averaged three or more contacts with staff per month on job search, job retention or advancement issues. We found some significant variations across sites in participation levels. First, participants in post-employment-focused programs generally received services for a greater number of months than did those in programs with pre-employment training, and were much more likely to average three or more contacts per month. Second, participation rates were significantly higher at three sites: Families in Touch (FIT) in Miami, Florida; Up With Wages (UWW) in Salem, Oregon; and Step Ahead North in Portland, Oregon.¹⁹ Across the FIT and UWW programs, 79 percent of participants

received six or more months of service and 51 percent averaged three or more contacts per month—the highest participation rates among all programs. Portland’s Step Ahead North also had higher participation rates, with three quarters of participants receiving services for six months or more, including six weeks of clerical training prior to employment. While these programs employed vastly different strategies, they have important components in common that were implemented more consistently than in other programs. These components may be key to increasing participation and, potentially, individuals’ employment and earnings, and are explored in depth in the next section.

THE POTENTIAL OF RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT SERVICES

To summarize, we examined the relationship between the type, duration and frequency of program participation and changes in participants’ employment and earnings. The evidence suggests that retention and advancement programs can contribute to improved employment outcomes for low-income workers.²⁰ We base this conclusion on the following:

- ◆ Participants who received services for six or more months or who averaged three or more contacts per month were more likely to be consistently employed, to work full-time and to experience greater increases in hourly wages and annual earnings.
- ◆ When asked to what extent they felt the programs helped them stay employed and advance in their jobs, almost three quarters of participants (74%) said the program played an important role.
- ◆ The percent increase in program participants’ hourly wages (12%) is significant. Studies of former welfare recipients show that their wages only grow about 1 percent annually, even among those who work steadily (Strawn 2001). Among a more general population of workers with few skills, Gladden and Tabor (1999) found that wages grow about 4 percent for each full year of work. These studies examined data for the years just prior to our study period, but even if these trends improved in later years, they would be unlikely to match the percent increases realized by initiative participants.

Despite these improvements, participants’ annual earnings remained low, and 39 percent were living in households with incomes below the poverty line one year after program entry. Many continued to rely on food stamps and public housing. On the other hand, the evidence concerning training participation suggests that individuals who obtain skills are likely to experience greater increases in hourly wages, at least in the short term. Our findings also suggest that sustaining participation is critical to the success of retention and advancement efforts. The next chapter examines the essential components of programs that were successful in keeping participants engaged.

Local Program Efforts: Strengths and Challenges

In addition to examining what happened to participants during the year after entering retention and advancement programs, we studied the experiences of the state and local area programs themselves. Our interviews with state officials, local staff, participants and employers suggest that program sites with higher levels of participation approached implementation more consistently than the others. Our findings imply that rather than simply tacking on post-employment follow-up contacts to existing pre-employment training and services, programs with higher participation incorporated three key strategies.

INCREASING PARTICIPATION

We noted in the previous chapter that three programs had higher rates of participation in program services than did the others, even after controlling for differences in participants' background characteristics. These programs—Families in Touch (FIT) in Miami, Up With Wages in Salem and Step Ahead North in Portland—incorporated three common elements in their retention strategies that we believe helped increase participation rates and thus have the potential to help improve employment outcomes for program participants. These elements are:

- ◆ A defined retention and advancement program structure;
- ◆ Activities to address challenges and opportunities as they arise; and
- ◆ Consistent incentives for participation.

A DEFINED RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Because retention and advancement was a relatively new concept, the local programs modified and adjusted their strategies as they learned what was most effective. All programs in our study offered case management and counseling support with services such as follow-up phone calls, visits to employers or occasional post-employment workshops, but FIT at Miami, Step Ahead North in Portland and Up With Wages in Salem infused retention and advancement activities into the entire program model. The program structures at each of these three sites differed substantially, but each offered participants many opportunities to increase their knowledge of appropriate work behavior, explore career interests and deal with challenges associated with work and home. Their different approaches suggest that employment and training organizations interested in providing retention and advancement strategies have a variety of options to consider, including post-employment workshops that are routine and structured, focused assistance for income-improvement plans for employed individuals, and pre-employment skills training programs with structured post-employment activities.

In Miami, the Human Services Coalition (HSC) developed the FIT program—52 support-group sessions held weekly for two hours at locations in participants’ neighborhoods—to help individuals build confidence and deal with barriers that might cause them to leave their jobs. Sessions covered topics such as career awareness, personal development and life skills, financial management, work skills and civic awareness. During sessions, specialists familiar with the social welfare system assisted individuals with needed support services, such as access to transitional benefits, post-secondary education and promotions at work. Specialists also were available between sessions to provide needed counseling or referrals to other services.

Adult and Family Services and Chemeketa Community College in Salem balanced individual assistance with group activities in their Up With Wages program. Employed individuals signed up with career mobility specialists who helped them develop an income-improvement plan that outlined the activities and assistance needed in three primary areas: career mobility, job development and career planning. Career mobility included help with employment barriers such as child care or transportation, problem-solving at work, income-improvement planning or referrals to other community resources. Job development activities involved access to labor market information, practice interviews, job referrals, identification of transferable skills, and creation and improvement of résumés. Career planning provided information on training and education, career decision-making and goal-setting, increasing job satisfaction, and assessing skills, values and interests. Assistance was provided through routine workshops or during one-to-one coaching sessions.

The strategy employed by Mt. Hood and Portland community colleges through the Step Ahead North program included six weeks of clerical training with highly focused case management both during the training and after employment. In addition, individuals participated in “Success at Work,” a series of employment retention classes. Instruction and assistance with job search and placement involved matching career interests with job tasks. After employment, individuals received regular telephone follow-up assistance at 30, 60 and 90 days, as well as at six months and a year. To keep connected further, working participants could attend specially structured activities on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., including computer training, a job club, financial advising and planning, and career development.

ACTIVITIES TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AS THEY ARISE

Many participants had a spotty work history—limited work experience, recent spells of unemployment or inability to hold a full-time job for at least one year—so each program offered specialized assistance to help meet the challenges at work. While all the organizations in the study contacted participants once they were employed, staff at FIT, Step Ahead North and Up With Wages used a number of activities to help participants address problems or confront work-related issues. For example, at each FIT session in Miami, trained facilitators led open discussions about problems at work, home or in other areas affecting employment. The facilitators encouraged peer networking and identification of additional support services and brainstorming ideas to deal with challenges. The design also included peer mentoring. Participants role-played interviews for job advancement or helped each other learn how to navigate the welfare system to obtain transitional benefits and housing assistance.

Employment and training organizations are often reluctant to intervene when participants experience problems on the job, but the Up With Wages program in Salem included employer mediation services as part of its strategy. Participants agreed during coaching sessions to allow staff to talk to supervisors on their behalf when it seemed appropriate. The workplace supervisors helped design the retention strategy and served on an advisory committee, and as a result they were open to help solve problems such as tardiness, absenteeism or poor communication. Retention staff members were cautious, however, about fostering too much dependence, and they helped participants develop negotiation and problem-solving skills of their own to address workplace challenges.

Assistance dealing with challenges related to advancement was an important part of the Step Ahead approach in Portland. Staff helped participants access transitional benefits, deal with employment barriers and obtain community resources for housing, clothing, utilities or food. Guidance regarding financial planning and earned-income tax credits was offered as well. All participants had an hourly wage goal: If they were placed in an initial job that fell short, or if individuals were interested in changing jobs, staff worked with them to find other jobs and to help them quit responsibly. Retention specialists helped individuals identify better job opportunities, update résumés, complete applications, and practice for and get to interviews. Access to education and financial aid was also available for those interested in continuing education.

CONSISTENT INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

Many participants came from single-parent households, earned wages below the poverty level and suffered from several other employment barriers such as lack of education, insufficient child care or inadequate transportation. Keeping these participants engaged in efforts that could improve retention required much attention by program staff. To encourage participant involvement, the FIT, Step Ahead North and Up Wages programs consistently provided incentives.

Primary incentives included cash, child care, time off from work and meals. Participants who attended three out of four of Miami's FIT sessions each month received a \$50 award. Participants were encouraged to deposit these awards in savings accounts that staff members helped set up. Child care for younger children and homework assistance for school-age children were also provided during FIT sessions. Support for children was a popular part of the program, so more structure was added to the sessions, including personal development lessons and engaging learning experiences. Meals were also served to participants and their children. With someone else feeding and caring for their children, the single moms had respite to learn and receive support from one another. The cash incentive made participation even more appealing.

In Portland, Step Ahead North participants received a \$250 incentive at the end of 6 and 12 months of employment. While participants attended Saturday sessions aimed at keeping them connected to the program, their children could take part in the learning and fun activities organized by the staff. Family members could participate together in special events such as picnics and holiday parties. Salem's Up With Wages participants were allowed to attend counseling sessions or workshops while getting paid.

These program elements are not new. Many employment and training programs use program structures, problem-solving activities or incentives to help participants remain employed. However, what seemed to be effective for the programs studied was the combination of these in a deliberately designed strategy focused on helping participants maintain both their employment and their connection to the program.

THE CHALLENGE OF ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

As part of the State Workforce Policy Initiative, P/PV explicitly asked state and local programs to involve employers in their efforts. In the initiative's first publication, *What's Next After Work First*, we acknowledged the need to explore how employers could be effectively engaged in program design and delivery. We noted that this would be one of the key challenges facing workforce development reform.

At the state level, the role of employers never gained significant traction in the discussion of how to strengthen state policies and practices. Locally, each program tried to involve employers by appointing them to advisory committees, using them in training activities and providing services to them. These efforts failed, however, to foster any fundamental changes in how well employers were engaged. Overall, local areas struggled in two primary ways:

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS REQUIRED CONSIDERABLE STAFF EXPERTISE, TIME AND EFFORT

P/PV expected sites to deepen existing relationships with employers and expand networks, but existing relationships changed little during the initiative. Sites experienced difficulty finding employers truly committed to providing services to retain entry-level workers. Providing retention services that were mutually beneficial for employers and participants required dedicated staff to recruit employers, develop relationships and deliver services—staff that most local areas did not have.

Programs delivered retention or advancement services that went beyond basic follow-up contacts in only a few instances. Up With Wages in Salem, a site with higher participation rates, had the most success with employer involvement. This may have been the result of the sponsoring agency, Adult and Family Services (AFS), being one of the employers. AFS enrolled entry-level workers from a few of its agency departments and had considerable control over the retention and advancement strategies implemented. However, the site also successfully engaged a private-sector employer, a national telecommunications company needing help to fill positions for a new facility. Staff worked with human resources personnel to screen applicants and provided on-site retention services and advancement workshops for new entry-level hires, similar to those offered to public sector employees.

INVOLVING EMPLOYERS IN NEW ACTIVITIES PROVED DIFFICULT

Most of the local areas were able to attract employers in traditional ways, involving them through advisory groups, internships or guest speaker programs. Other employers sponsored events such as graduations. But many employers held little interest in hiring participants, let alone helping them stay on the job. In some cases, local staff did not have the expertise or time to develop retention-focused relationships with employers. In other cases, local staff did not want to jeopardize the assistance they already received by asking too much of employers.

RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT STRATEGIES REQUIRE STRUCTURE AND RELEVANT CONTENT

The development and implementation of retention and advancement strategies requires a focused commitment from local organizations. Considerable attention must be given in the initial program design to ensure that activities are well structured and create opportunities for participants to solve problems. The sites with higher participation rates implemented a range of such activities, including support groups, career- and employment-related workshops, on-the-job coaching and mediating with employers when problems arose. We also found that incentives such as cash rewards, child care or time off to attend activities may have increased participation and improved outcomes for participants. Finally, while we believe that the engagement of employers in retention and advancement strategies is important, sites had difficulty achieving this goal of the initiative.

Efforts to Develop and Strengthen State Policies

A

s states worked to strengthen policies in support of retention and advancement activities, they faced challenges, as we noted in concluding our second report on this initiative, *States of Change*:

“State and local programs have much to consider in creating policies and shaping strategies to help low-income workers maintain steady employment and increase wages. Although the current policy environment allows states significant latitude to support the working poor, the political, economic and social issues that must be addressed are numerous and complex. Still, we have an unusual opportunity to support those who are struggling to work their way out of poverty.”

Each of the five participating states started with different circumstances and levels of interest. Florida and Oregon began taking significant steps before the initiative got underway. Likewise, Washington had already committed substantial funds—approximately \$30 million annually—to provide skills training to unemployed and employed low-income workers through the community college system and wanted to broaden the effort to ensure that workers stayed employed and advanced. Colorado and Oklahoma wanted to better understand how they might strengthen state workforce development systems.

As the initiative evolved, P/PV established relationships with senior state policy officials in Colorado through the WIA program, in Florida and Oregon through the TANF program and in Washington through the community college system. (No solid relationship was established in Oklahoma at the state level.) These relationships were the entry points for focusing state attention on possible retention and advancement strategies. The following provides a brief summary of what happened in these states.

STATES HAD MIXED SUCCESS PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING STRATEGIES

As the initiative unfolded, Florida, Oregon and Washington took action to promote retention and advancement strategies. Colorado and Oklahoma did not.

FLORIDA

Florida’s legislature combined employment and training services offered through TANF and WIA under one administrative entity to minimize duplication of efforts and maximize resources. The state required localities to “design and implement strategies that help Floridians enter, remain in and advance in the workplace, becoming more highly skilled and successful.” The new administrative entity created three state councils to assist

in this work. The First Jobs/First Wages Council addressed youth and TANF employment issues; the Better Jobs/Better Wages Council dealt with programs to help individuals to attain self-sufficient incomes; and the High-Skill/High-Wage Jobs Council focused on the advancement of low-wage workers.

For the past several years, the Better Jobs/Better Wages Council has allocated about \$4 million annually to the Career Advancement and Retention Challenge program, which finances local retention and advancement programs. During 2002-2003, the program supported efforts in 12 of Florida's 24 regional workforce areas. According to the council, 1,056 participants completed retention and advancement services, and within only six months, more than half had obtained upgraded positions.

OREGON

Adult and Family Services (now called the Self-Sufficiency Program) was strongly committed to developing state policies to promote retention and advancement when the initiative began. During the initiative, the division focused state-level efforts in four key ways:

- ◆ Targeting post-employment retention and advancement for individuals who fell below 185 percent of poverty;
- ◆ Requiring Adult and Family Services (AFS) offices to spend 25 percent of their budgets on post-employment retention and advancement activities;
- ◆ Developing performance measures to improve results; and
- ◆ Redefining the role of case managers as they took on new responsibilities as coaches and mentors.

Several of Oregon's local TANF offices tried to implement these policies but hit a roadblock when state budget shortfalls deepened. The governor consolidated workforce development efforts to balance the budget and meet the needs of the changing population. The Department of Human Services significantly reduced its focus on retention and advancement strategies and increased collaboration with one-stop service centers.

WASHINGTON

Washington officials were among the few in the country to publicly say they wanted to use welfare reform to liberate recipients (and those at risk of becoming welfare recipients) from dependency and poverty (Alssid et al. 2002). The state focused a significant part of its overall strategy to help participants gain access to education and training through the community college system, leading to targeted training programs in many of Washington's 33 community and technical colleges. As this effort unfolded during the initiative, senior leaders of the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges worked to obtain state funds to broaden the college training efforts to include retention and advancement strategies. Unfortunately, the same economic decline and state budget problems that confronted Oregon occurred in Washington, leading the state to slightly reduce education and training funds to \$24 million. At the same time, focus on retention and advancement activities diminished.

STATES HAD DIFFICULTIES SUSTAINING STRATEGIES

Two reasons for the state-level difficulties stand out: Several states did not have sufficient capacity to promote and support retention activities at the local level; and, over time, the primary impetus for supporting retention and advancement dissipated.

LACK OF STATE CAPACITY

Colorado and Oklahoma appointed no state-level staff with the responsibility of concentrating on retention and advancement policies and activities. These state staffs were either focused on other issues or stretched thin trying to deal with day-to-day administrative workforce development challenges. P/PV provided outside assistance to the local areas, possibly signaling that state-level involvement was unneeded. We are not certain of the reason, but in the end, no advocate existed in the state policymaking arena.

The lack of state capacity also affects most local programs without the finances to hire outside consultants, a role P/PV played in the initiative. Local organizations often need to turn to state officials for the expertise and experience to design structured program activities and services that are meaningful for participants. The absence of state capacity can limit the broad adoption of strategies across most local workforce development programs unless there are other compelling reasons to focus attention.

DECLINE IN THE ECONOMY AND STATE BUDGETS

The states' economic, fiscal and political environment changed substantially during the project. During the last years of the initiative, businesses no longer were challenged to find and keep workers as the economy declined in many states. In addition, states confronted significant budget shortfalls and thus backed off supporting new initiatives, with some drastically cutting budgets. The combination of these factors reduced the impetus for some states, such as Oregon, to focus on retention and advancement strategies. The result was that the resources and staff devoted to retention and advancement were redirected to other activities.

POLICY CHALLENGES REMAIN

Only two of the states in the initiative, Florida and, to some extent, Washington, were able to maintain a commitment to retention and advancement policies over the course of the initiative. Florida continued to promote and support retention and advancement activities among local workforce development organizations, creating legislation to codify its commitment and developing a sophisticated performance measurement system to hold local areas accountable. In Washington, the specific focus on retention and advancement diminished, but the state continued to use education and training to help people maintain steady employment and advance, and it routinely reviews results of local efforts.

Concluding Comments

The experience of the State Workforce Policy Initiative suggests that states and local areas can take specific actions to facilitate job retention and advancement. For states concerned that low-income individuals get a job, stay employed and increase earnings, consideration of the findings of this initiative can be an important first step. The local programs and the participant outcomes point to promising practices to help low-income individuals maintain employment and advance. Not all local programs in the initiative were equally successful in engaging participants in program activities, but those that were used similar practices, which other programs might do well to consider. One promising practice observed during the initiative involved not merely tacking follow-up services to existing pre-employment activities but building a defined retention and advancement structure. Providing activities to address challenges and opportunities at work as they arise and offering consistent incentives may help keep participants engaged in program services and, in turn, contribute to more consistent employment, better wages and benefits, and higher annual earnings.

The initiative revealed, however, that much needs to be done by states to create an environment where such strategies can develop and flourish. In reality, the current employment and training system focuses more on helping people get a job than helping them stay employed and advance. Although more research is needed to identify the most successful strategies, retention and advancement efforts represent a promising way to benefit both program participants and employers.

The federal government, through an effort called Common Measures²¹, will use common outcomes to measure 31 employment and training programs across six federal agencies, including programs encountered through this study, such as WIA and TANF, as well as adult education and career training programs. The Common Measures will focus on adult participants' success at becoming employed, staying employed and increasing earnings. Overall, the public interest in more financially secure families is matched by businesses' need for a more stable and productive workforce. All evidence suggests that the economic downturn of the past several years will soon be followed by a growing demand for productive and skilled workers. To effectively meet the needs of its business customers as well as to increase the wages of low-income program participants, the publicly financed employment and training system will need to address retention and advancement issues. Given the findings of this initiative, the system might also be able to cut public costs for welfare and other subsidies if workers are better able to support themselves and their families.

The last half of the 1990s provided a compelling economic, labor market and policy environment for states and localities to give more attention to employment retention and advancement. For most areas that acted, the attention was short-lived and retention and advancement did not become an integral part of state and local workforce development systems. Conditions changed, and the opportunity for action with longer-range impact was lost.

Economic conditions are changing again and new opportunities are emerging; state and local actions should not be left to chance. Specific goals and policies that drive state and local systems to focus on helping workers maintain steady employment and advance are needed. As Elliott et al. (1998) noted in the reconnaissance report that launched this initiative, “To justify continued public investment, workforce programs need to demonstrate that they are useful tools in overcoming poverty.” Clearly, retention and advancement strategies are potential tools to help move in a positive direction toward this goal. An important next step is to engage a larger number of states and local areas in implementing and evaluating the promising retention and advancement strategies of this initiative to determine if the positive outcomes can be increased and sustained.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Retention is defined as efforts to help individuals maintain steady employment, and advancement is defined as efforts to help individuals increase wages while employed.
- 2 *States of Change* documents efforts by state policymakers and local practitioners to devise useful approaches to help low-income job seekers stay employed and begin advancing. It draws, in part, from P/PV's experiences working with these five states and provides examples and lessons from several other states. *States of Change* outlines the key elements of supporting steady employment and advancement for low-income workers, offers examples of existing state policies and programs to enable low-income workers to retain employment and advance on the job, identifies design and implementation challenges, and provides ideas for promoting retention and advancement policies and programs.
- 3 P/PV provided each state with \$150,000 of support over the two-year period. In most cases, states added funding to help local areas implement their strategies, or local areas raised funds on their own.
- 4 The Colorado Workforce Coordinating Council was reorganized during the initiative and renamed the Office of Local Affairs.
- 5 WAGES combined with the Florida Workforce Investment Board to become Workforce Florida, Inc.
- 6 Oregon's Division of Adult and Family Services is now called the Self-Sufficiency Program.
- 7 In 2001 dollars.
- 8 WIC is the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.
- 9 See <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/home.htm#overview> for historical data on the 12-month percentage change in compensation nationwide.
- 10 This relationship was significant at the .05 level.
- 11 In addition to participants' employment outcomes, we examined the relationship between the level of services received and other important outcomes, such as receipt of TANF or food stamps, household income and the value of participants' assets and debts. We did not find a statistically significant relationship between the number of months participants received services or the number of contacts they had with staff and any of these outcomes.
- 12 In Tables 9 through 12, we highlight only relationships that are statistically significant at a .10 level of confidence. Working at some time during the year was significant at the .01 level and working at least nine months of the year was significant at the .05 level.

- 13 Because the groups of participants differed, we calculated the probabilities by controlling for age, gender, race, education, work experience, receipt of AFDC/TANF benefits, the presence of other adults in the household, the types and number of barriers to employment the participant faced and the average local area unemployment rate in the year after enrolling. See Appendix A for more details on the methodology.
- 14 Both relationships are significant at the .10 level.
- 15 Both relationships are significant at the .10 level.
- 16 This finding takes into account participants' characteristics and work histories. This relationship is significant at the .01 level for training completers; $p=.10$ for noncompleters.
- 17 Data are presented for training completers and noncompleters separately to deal with analytical problems associated with the high correlation between a participant's site and the local unemployment rate, which varied for pre-employment training and post-employment-focused sites.
- 18 We defined limited previous work experience as never having had a full-time job that lasted at least one year.
- 19 After controlling for participant demographic characteristics, pre-program labor market experience and barriers to work, the association between these programs and higher levels of participation (whether defined by months in the program or number of contacts per month) remains significant at the .01 level. This finding provides evidence that certain characteristics of the programs themselves, rather than simply a better selection of participants, are associated with greater levels of participation.
- 20 Our findings must be interpreted with caution because the analysis cannot establish cause and effect in these relationships and we cannot control for participants' motivation or other unmeasured characteristics that affect both program participation and employment success.
- 21 See www.doleta.gov/performance/guidance/tools_communication

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

BASELINE AND FOLLOW-UP SURVEYS

The estimates presented in this report are derived from baseline and 12-month follow-up surveys administered by Abt Associates, Inc. The baseline survey was designed to obtain information about participants' demographic characteristics and pre-program employment experiences; use of government benefit programs; living environment; barriers to employment; and other factors potentially related to program outcomes. Individuals were interviewed within several weeks of enrolling in the program, and all interviews were conducted by telephone using a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) system. The timing of the baseline survey varied by program site but went on from October 1998 through May 2000. Of the 717 eligible participants, 623 completed the baseline survey. Excluding 85 participants who were dropped from the program shortly after enrolling, the response rate for the baseline survey was 98.5 percent.

The follow-up survey, designed to document participants' experiences in the 12 months following enrollment, again covered employment and a variety of other domains related to outcomes. This survey, which began in November 1999 and concluded during November 2001, was also conducted by telephone using CATI. In total, 477 of the 623 individuals who completed the baseline survey also finished the follow-up survey, a response rate of 77 percent. The overall response rate for the follow-up survey, calculated with the 632 eligible non-dropped participants at baseline in the denominator, is 75 percent. On average, participants completed their follow-up interview 14 months after the baseline survey.

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES OF THE PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The analytic strategy used in this report involves comparing changes in outcome measures over time and estimating the association between these changes and participant characteristics and experiences in the initiative. We use multivariate models that include a group of explanatory variables that capture demographic characteristics, education, labor market experience, barriers to employment and other factors that might otherwise affect outcomes. This allows us to evaluate the association between an outcome measure and an explanatory variable after the effects of other variables have been controlled for.

In general, the models take the following form:

$$(1) \quad Y_f = \alpha + \xi_1 Y_b + \beta_i X + \delta_1 P_T + \delta_2 P_{NT} + \gamma_1 S + \gamma_2 C + \gamma_3 S^*C + \varepsilon$$

where:

- Y_f = The post-program value of the outcome variable observed at the time of the follow-up survey.
- Y_b = The pre-program value of the outcome variable observed at the time of the baseline survey.
- X = a vector of explanatory variables.
- P_T = a dummy variable for pre-employment training completers.
- P_{NT} = a dummy variable for pre-employment training noncompleters.
- S = a dummy variable for having received six or more months of service.
- C = a dummy variable for having an average of three or more contacts per month.
- S^*C = an interaction term for having received six months of service and averaging three or more contacts per month.
- $\alpha, \xi, \beta, \delta, \gamma$ = coefficients.
- ε = a stochastic disturbance term with a mean of zero and a constant variance.

Note that this model might be thought of as similar to a specification using the calculated change in the outcome measure as the dependent variable. Equation 1 is preferable to such a form as it does not require the assumption that the pre-program value of the outcome variable and the post-program change are perfectly related. If this assumption holds, estimates will be identical to those from an equation with change scores as the dependent variable.

We model continuous outcome variables using ordinary least squares regression (OLS) and use logit models, a nonlinear maximum likelihood estimation technique, for dichotomous dependent variables. This specification allows us to explicitly control for the effect of a variety of characteristics and experiences while estimating the association between outcomes and background characteristics, represented by the coefficients β_1 , as well as program type and training completion, $\delta_{1,2}$; and program participation, γ_{1-3} .

All models include the following explanatory variables, measured at the time of program enrollment: age; gender; race, measured by whether the participant was African American or another non-Caucasian race or ethnicity such as Asian or Latino; education, measured by whether the participant was a high school graduate or had obtained a GED or held an advanced degree including any beyond an associate's degree; work experience, measured by whether the participant had ever held a full-time job for more than one year; receipt of AFDC/TANF benefits in the month prior to starting the program; the presence of any other adults in the household; and the average local area unemployment rate in the year after enrolling.

Models also include controls for a variety of barriers to employment, including whether the participants reported that a lack of skills was a very important reason that kept them from getting the job that they wanted, and the count of household barriers that were reported as a very important reason that kept them from getting the jobs that they wanted. These include problems securing child care; health problems of another family member; and parental or spousal opposition to their working. Models also include a count of personal barriers, including having a criminal record, ever having been homeless or other factors that they reported as a very important reason that kept them from getting the jobs that they wanted, such as drug or alcohol abuse, language barriers or difficulty obtaining transportation to work.

Intensity of program contact is measured by whether the individual received six or more months of assistance from the program and whether the individual had an average of three or more contacts with the program per month. Models also include an interaction term that captures very intensive use, defined as having both six or more months of service and averaging three or more contacts per month.

We control for program type by considering three separate groups: those who participated in a program with pre-employment occupational training and completed the training; those who participated in a program with pre-employment occupational training but did not complete the training; and those who participated in a program that did not offer pre-employment occupational training. This makes it possible to investigate the association between program type and outcomes by examining the outcomes among graduates and nongraduates who received pre-employment training relative to participants from programs that did not offer pre-employment occupational training.

One general shortcoming of this pre-/post-research design results from the lack of a control group. Although models include controls for the factors that are hypothesized to affect outcomes, outcomes may nevertheless be influenced by factors for which we cannot control with the available information or may otherwise be unobservable. For example, a portion of the difference in outcomes between training completers and those who did not participate in a program with pre-employment training may result from self-selection among, for example, highly driven individuals rather than completion of the training curriculum in and of itself.

PREDICTED OUTCOMES

The statistics presented in Tables 7 through 10 represent the predicted, or simulated, values of outcomes for a hypothetical program participant with characteristics determined by sample averages for all explanatory variables with the exception of those being simulated. The predicted values represent probabilities and levels for logit and OLS models, respectively. For example, the values in Table 7 represent the likelihood of employment for two hypothetical individuals whose characteristics differ only by whether they did or did not receive six or more months of program services. Simulated values are calculated by multiplying the vector of coefficients, β , by the vector of explanatory variable values for the hypothetical individual, X , with the exception of the value of the variable that is the focus of the simulation. This value is defined according to the difference being tested in a given scenario. For logit models, predicted probabilities are calculated as:

$$\hat{p} = \frac{1}{(1 + e^{-\beta X})}$$



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