

**The Employment Retention  
and Advancement Project**

**Results from the Valuing Individual Success and  
Increasing Opportunities Now (VISION) Program in  
Salem, Oregon**

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The findings and conclusions presented herein do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of HHS.

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## Overview

Although much is known about how to help unemployed welfare recipients find jobs, little is known about how to help them and other low-wage workers keep jobs or advance in the labor market. This report presents an assessment of the implementation and effects at the one-year follow-up point of a program in Salem, Oregon, that aimed to promote better initial job placements, employment retention, and advancement among applicants to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program who were unemployed. The program is part of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project, which is testing 16 models across the country. The ERA project is being conducted by MDRC, under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with additional funding from the U.S. Department of Labor.

The Salem ERA program began operating in May 2002. Called VISION, it was jointly operated by staff from the local welfare agency and a local community college, and it was located at a One-Stop Career Center. The program provided TANF applicants with job search and placement services, including workshops that focused on future job retention and career paths. Then, once clients secured employment, VISION was to continue with postemployment services to promote job retention and career advancement. VISION is being evaluated using a random assignment research design whereby eligible individuals were assigned, through a lottery-like process, either to a program group, whose members participated in VISION, or to a control group, whose members participated in Oregon's standard welfare-to-work program (known as JOBS).

## Key Findings

- **A pre- to postemployment model of providing retention and advancement services was difficult for program operators to implement.** During the preemployment period, VISION had more frequent contact with clients and delivered additional workshops and other services that had a strong retention and advancement message. A high proportion of VISION group members participated in group job search. However, VISION staff struggled to develop and implement the postemployment retention and advancement component. They had a difficult time managing both employed and unemployed clients, and the bulk of staff time was spent on preemployment responsibilities, particularly eligibility issues and individual crises.
- **VISION operated in a difficult environment.** Implementation was further complicated by the fact that the program operated in a difficult economic and fiscal environment and suffered from staff turnover and cutbacks, funding shortages, and management issues.
- **VISION did not achieve its goals of helping participants secure better jobs and advance in the labor market.** VISION did not generate statistically significant impacts on employment, retention, or advancement during the first follow-up year. However, the increased attention and longer-term contact provided by staff to VISION clients led to their having greater access to public assistance — including TANF, food stamps, and public health insurance — during the first year of follow-up.

These results are not the final word on the VISION program in Salem. MDRC will continue to track the impacts of VISION using unemployment insurance records.



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## About the Employment Retention and Advancement Project

The federal welfare overhaul of 1996 ushered in myriad policy changes aimed at getting low-income parents off public assistance and into employment. These changes — especially cash welfare’s transformation from an entitlement into a time-limited benefit contingent on work participation — have intensified the need to help low-income families become economically self-sufficient and remain so in the long term. Although a fair amount is known about how to help welfare recipients prepare for and find jobs in the first place, the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project is the most comprehensive effort thus far to ascertain which approaches help welfare recipients and other low-income people stay steadily employed and advance in their jobs.

Launched in 1999 and slated to end in 2009, the ERA project encompasses more than a dozen demonstration programs and uses a rigorous research design to analyze the programs’ implementation and impacts on research sample members, who were randomly assigned to the study groups. The study was conceived and funded by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; supplemental support has been provided by the U.S. Department of Labor. The project is being conducted by MDRC. Most of the ERA programs were designed specifically for the purposes of evaluation, in some cases building on prior initiatives. Because the programs’ aims and target populations vary, so do their services:

- **Advancement programs** focus on helping low-income workers move into better jobs by offering such services as career counseling and education and training.
- **Placement and retention programs** seek to help participants find and hold jobs and are aimed mostly at “hard-to-employ” people, such as welfare recipients who have disabilities or substance abuse problems.
- **Mixed-goals programs** focus on job placement, retention, and advancement, in that order, and are targeted primarily to welfare recipients who are searching for jobs.

The ERA project’s evaluation component investigates the following aspects of each program:

- **Implementation.** What services does the program provide? How are those services delivered? Who receives them? How are problems addressed?

- **Impacts.** To what extent does the program improve employment rates, job retention, advancement, and other key outcomes? Looking across programs, which approaches are most effective, and for whom?

A total of 16 ERA models have been implemented in eight states: California, Illinois, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, and Texas. But — given significant differences in implementation in the three sites operating the Texas model — the project ultimately will yield 18 independent estimates of site effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>

The evaluation draws on administrative and fiscal records, surveys of participants, and field visits to the sites.

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<sup>1</sup>Past reports list 15 ERA models. This number was changed, however, to recognize that one of the tests in Riverside, California, actually involved two models, given the two initiatives' different sets of service providers and program rules. Note that “site effectiveness” refers to the effectiveness of different models or to the effectiveness of a model that was implemented very differently in a number of locations.

## Acknowledgments

The Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) evaluation would not have been possible without the cooperation, commitment, and hard work of a wide range of administrators and staff in all the ERA sites. Notably, findings from all the sites in the evaluation contribute to addressing the study's key questions. All the sites stepped forward to innovate in a challenging and important area of social policy and practice, and as much can be learned from models that so far are not showing economic impacts as from those that are. For the evaluation of the Salem, Oregon, ERA program, called "VISION" (Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now), the following individuals deserve special thanks.

Ron Taylor, Roma Vasquez, and Michele Brandt of the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) and Chris Murfin of Chemeketa Community College have been vital to the evaluation. They played major roles in the program design, worked closely with MDRC to set up and monitor the evaluation, assisted in arranging many site visits, facilitated a range of other research and data collection activities, and provided support throughout the study. Michael Buckley and Sandy Dugan of the Oregon Department of Human Services and Ron Basset-Smith, Lori Bush, and Connie Green of Chemeketa Community College also provided guidance and support. Program staff graciously accommodated numerous MDRC site visits and data collection activities, and they also willingly discussed their experiences and participated in an in-depth study of how they spent their time at work. Kevin Hern and Lisa Baker of DHS provided administrative records data to MDRC for the study.

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Finally, we extend our deep appreciation to the hundreds of families who participated in the study and gave generously of their time to respond to a survey.

The Authors



## **Executive Summary**

This report presents interim results for the Salem, Oregon, site in the national Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project. The ERA project was conceived and funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and is also supported by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The project is testing 16 innovative models across the country that aim to promote steady work and career advancement for current and former welfare recipients and other low-wage workers. A great deal is known about how to help these groups find jobs, but there are few proven strategies for promoting retention and advancement. MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, is conducting the ERA evaluation under contract to ACF and is producing a similar interim report for each site in the project.

The Salem ERA program, which operated beginning in May 2002, targeted applicants of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance benefits who were unemployed. The program was designed to increase job placement, job quality, and advancement in the labor market for participants, who are mostly single mothers applying for welfare.

### **Origins and Context of the Salem ERA Program**

Of the four ERA programs located in Oregon, the Salem ERA program, VISION (Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now), was the only one designed to begin working with clients prior to their employment. The program began with job search and placement services, and, once clients were employed, VISION continued to provide services intended to promote job retention and advancement.

As mandated by the State of Oregon, all TANF applicants, unless exempt, were required to participate in job search activities; participation in job search activities occurred concurrently with applicants' eligibility determination. During a period that could last up to 45 days (called the "assessment period"), the regular welfare-to-work program, Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS), provided applicants with a series of basic job search and preparation workshops. Services were provided by staff from the local community college, Chemeketa, and were delivered at branch offices of the Salem Department of Human Services (DHS). The JOBS program embodied a "work-first" philosophy, and services ended once clients found jobs and DHS determined them to be "over income" for TANF assistance.

In Salem, the welfare, workforce, and community college systems had a long history of working together to deliver employment-related services. VISION built on these longstanding relationships and was created to provide applicants with more than the basic preemployment

services provided by JOBS. Unlike that program, VISION was designed to help clients identify and work toward a job of interest, and services took place at the local One-Stop Career Center, rather than at the welfare office.<sup>1</sup>

Retention and advancement were emphasized from the onset of the VISION program, and the same staff worked with clients both before and after clients' employment. The reasons behind this design were threefold: (1) to introduce the idea of job retention to clients prior to job placement, (2) to encourage clients to think about career goals and advancement early on, and (3) to establish a rapport that would ensure clients' long-term engagement and, therefore, participation in VISION's postemployment services. The goal for the postemployment phase was to help clients follow through on the goals that they had identified prior to their employment. The ERA Salem test determines whether such a model helped participants fare better in the labor market than those who went through the regular welfare-to-work program, JOBS.

VISION operated in a difficult environment. Oregon has consistently had a higher unemployment rate than the national average. During the time that VISION operated, Oregon's economy was often named the "worst" in the country. Its economic environment impacted not only the type of job opportunities available to VISION's clients but also the staffing capacity and cohesiveness of the program itself. The program had hoped to place many participants in jobs with the State of Oregon, Salem's largest employer, but, due to budget shortfalls and a statewide hiring freeze, this goal never materialized. On the staffing side, VISION experienced a high rate of turnover and was constantly trying to integrate new staff and acquire their buy-in. As a result of the statewide hiring freeze, the program was unable to fill these vacancies in a timely manner.

## **The ERA Evaluation**

As in the other ERA sites, MDRC is using a random assignment research design to assess the effectiveness of the VISION program. Starting in May 2002 and ending in May 2004, TANF applicants entering the two participating Salem DHS welfare offices who met the criteria for Oregon's welfare-to-work services were assigned, at random, to either the VISION group or the JOBS group, with 50 percent being assigned to each group. Sample members were notified of their research status by the random assignment clerk, who explained the ERA study and gave clients written material describing the project.

MDRC is tracking both groups using data provided by the State of Oregon that show each individual's monthly welfare and food stamp benefits and quarterly earnings in jobs covered by the state's unemployment insurance (UI) program. One year of UI follow-up data is

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<sup>1</sup>The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 authorized funding for employment and training services and programs through a system of One-Stop Centers.

available for each person in the report's analysis. One year of administrative records covering welfare and food stamp benefits is available for sample members who were randomly assigned through September 2003 (roughly 54 percent of the total sample). In addition, the ERA 12-Month Survey was administered to a subset of VISION and JOBS group members about one year after they entered the study.

Because individuals were assigned to the VISION and JOBS groups through a random process, the two groups were comparable at the start of the study. Thus, any differences that emerged between the groups during the study's follow-up period can be attributed to the VISION program; such differences are known as the "impacts" of the program. A total of 1,504 single parents in the VISION and JOBS groups are included in this report's analysis.

## **The ERA Target Population**

The VISION program targeted low-income families with children who were TANF applicants and who were potentially eligible for TANF. People became eligible for the ERA program when they first applied for aid. Once randomly assigned, unless it was determined that they were exempt from participating in work-related activities, TANF applicants entered into a job search period (called an "assessment period" in Oregon), lasting up to 45 days. Approximately 83 percent of the TANF applicants in the research sample for this study were single-parent families at the time of random assignment, and the analysis in this report focuses on the single parents in this group. As is typical of TANF applicants, the sample members seemed fairly "job-ready"; nearly 50 percent of them had been employed for more than two of the prior three years. Most had received TANF assistance for less than two years, and 41 percent of the sample had never received it. Nearly 70 percent had a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or a higher degree of education. Most sample members are white and English-speaking. Not surprising for a sample of TANF applicants, most had young children when they entered the study.

## **Key Findings on Program Implementation**

- **During the preemployment period, VISION was successful in engaging the large majority of program-eligible clients. VISION's additional preemployment workshops, its location at the One-Stop Career Center, and its ability to extend job search were the primary differences between it and JOBS.**

VISION was successful in engaging the large majority of program-eligible clients during the preemployment period. However, since participants in both VISION and JOBS were held to the same job search participation requirements, the two programs had similarly high levels of en-

gagement during this time. VISION created a set of preemployment workshops that were different from those in JOBS, inasmuch as they focused on career planning and job retention. Participation in the range of workshops was uneven, with a larger percentage of participants attending a few workshops but with few attending the full range of workshops available to them.

While the services at the One-Stop Career Center were also available to individuals in JOBS, the VISION participants had a stronger and more immediate connection to the center. VISION was physically located there, and VISION staff provided participants with direct assistance in using its resources, such as the computer room, the Oregon Labor Marketing Information System, résumé writing, mock interviews, and employer presentations. VISION staff could also access vocational training dollars by becoming co-enrolled in WIA, and VISION staff helped their customers through the enrollment process.

If there were promising prospects for a client, VISION staff had the option of extending job search beyond the 45-day period. In the end, VISION still operated within the parameters of welfare-to-work regulations, and since job opportunities were limited, clients often had to take “survival” jobs rather than jobs that had advancement opportunities or were in their field of interest.

- **VISION staff struggled to develop and implement the postemployment retention and advancement component that made the program distinctive from JOBS. Even so, participants clearly appreciated staff’s support and their long-term message about advancement.**

Each VISION client worked with a case manager, who was employed by DHS, and a training and employment specialist, employed by Chemeketa Community College. The VISION case manager was primarily responsible for eligibility determination, and the training and employment specialist was in charge of the client’s job search, job retention, and career advancement. VISION staff had a difficult time managing both employed and unemployed clients, and the bulk of their time was spent on preemployment responsibilities, particularly eligibility issues and individual crises. Staff often expressed frustrations about being crisis managers and, thus, about being unable to focus on the larger advancement goals of VISION. Turnover also contributed to the staff’s inability to move beyond preemployment concerns, because when there was a vacancy in the case manager positions, the training and employment specialists were forced to take on some of the administrative duties.

In addition, staff had a difficult time articulating what advancement should “look” like, and despite the various training that staff received on how to deliver retention and advancement services, staff reported that they did not have the skills or experience to develop and deliver advancement services. Consequently, VISION had few services to offer their working clients, and the program struggled to engage them.



Only when VISION was nearing its end and random assignment had stopped did staff have the time and resources to turn attention to working clients and the program's postemployment objectives. At that point — essentially, when random assignment had ended and caseloads had stopped growing — staff began dividing into specialized positions and focused more intently on providing advancement services. As a result of the late focus on advancement, the services that were provided — such as individual meetings with the advancement training and employment specialist and “Career Night” — suffered from low engagement in general. In hindsight, most of the staff felt that VISION would have operated more efficiently had roles been specialized earlier.

Despite these challenges, participants repeatedly named VISION's message about advancement and the staff's customer service as the program's greatest strengths. Participants stated that VISION staff recognized that getting a job was not an end in itself and encouraged them to pursue a desired career path, or a “field of fascination.” They clearly appreciated staff's support and guidance, and once advancement meetings began, the strong staff-client rapport enabled the advancement training and employment specialist to better address clients' potential barriers and on-the-job issues. Less clear was how VISION staff helped clients achieve their long-term career objectives.

In contrast, like most traditional welfare-to-work programs, JOBS conveyed a clear work-first message throughout its contacts with clients. Once clients were employed, the postemployment contacts — if there were any — dealt mainly with eligibility or supportive service issues.

- **Welfare and community college staff entered VISION with different philosophies about the program's policies and goals, which affected the delivery of services.**

Delivering retention and advancement services within the parameters of the welfare-to-work system was a new and difficult pursuit. The two types of staff (which included five welfare case managers and four community college employment specialists) struggled to reconcile their different work cultures and philosophies, and welfare staff, in particular, had to make a large transition. They had to adjust to a customer-service, team environment, as opposed to one of process and regulations, and had to use “advancement” as the ultimate benchmark, rather than the work-first philosophy of the welfare system. These challenges affected team cohesiveness and service delivery, and they contributed to, and were exacerbated by, the high turnover of VISION case managers.

- **The design of the VISION program helped link clients to public assistance.**

While VISION operated under the same eligibility requirements for public assistance as JOBS did, VISION's program design helped clients navigate the application processes and, therefore, provided better access to public assistance. Due to the program's emphasis on customer service, a VISION case manager or training and employment specialist was readily available to deal with eligibility issues and to help clients complete applications. Such aid was particularly helpful in ensuring continued receipt of the Oregon Health Plan.

Since VISION staff had more long-term and frequent contact with participants than JOBS staff did, they were able to ensure that clients were at all times accessing the supportive services for which they were eligible. Finally, since VISION continued after clients were employed and served those who were no longer eligible for TANF, staff were able to connect clients to government benefits immediately, if at any point they became eligible (for example, due to a job loss).

## **Key Findings on Participation Impacts**

- **Both VISION and JOBS clients reported relatively high levels of contact with staff. However, those in VISION had more staff contacts, including a slightly greater number of in-person meetings.**

While both research groups had extensive contact with program staff in the year following random assignment, the VISION program still produced an increase in the average number of staff-client contacts during this period. According to survey data, an individual in VISION had 22 contacts with program staff during the year, compared with 16 contacts for a member of the JOBS group. VISION group members were also slightly more likely to have in-person contacts. These impacts provide further evidence that VISION staff worked hard to reach out and be available to their clients.

- **A higher proportion of individuals in VISION than in JOBS participated in job search activities.**

VISION increased the proportion of clients who participated in group job search or job club during the year following random assignment: 64 percent of the VISION group did so, compared with 49 percent of the JOBS group. This difference is most likely attributed to the fact that VISION participants had access to the program's preemployment workshops and had a stronger connection to the Career Center's job search services. The difference might also reflect VISION's focus on client engagement. The program's additional workshops focused on job retention and career paths and were unique to VISION; the workshops were not available to JOBS participants.

In addition, VISION group members were engaged in job search for an average of nine weeks — three weeks longer than JOBS participants. This could be a result of VISION’s ability to extend the job search period if clients had promising job prospects.

- **Individuals in VISION were more likely than those in JOBS to receive help with retention and advancement — particularly retention.**

The VISION program increased the proportion of clients who received some kind of help with job retention or advancement: 34 percent of the VISION group reported receiving help in this area, compared with 21 percent of the JOBS group. This nearly 14 percentage point increase appears to be driven by retention-related assistance — assistance in dealing with on-the-job and personal problems that could affect job retention.

There was a small increase in the proportion of clients who received help with finding a better job while working: 9 percent of the VISION group reported this, compared with 4 percent of the JOBS group. Although this is encouraging, the difference is small.

## **Key Findings on Economic Impacts**

- **VISION did not generate statistically significant impacts on employment or earnings during Year 1.**

The VISION program in Salem, compared with JOBS, did not generate any statistically significant impacts on employment or earnings outcomes during the first year after clients entered the program (Table ES.1). In a typical quarter, about 40 percent of VISION group members were employed, compared with 42 percent of JOBS group members. Year 1 earnings for VISION group members are estimated to be about \$270 below the JOBS group average of \$4,100, but this difference is not statistically significant. By the last quarter of the follow-up period, the program was still not generating increases in earnings or employment. VISION, compared with JOBS, had no effects on employment and earnings across a variety of subgroups and cohorts. The program also had no effect on various measures of overall employment, as reported by respondents to the ERA 12-Month Survey.

- **VISION increased public assistance receipt but had no statistically significant effect on total income.**

Table ES.2 shows the impacts of VISION on public assistance receipt and income. The ERA program in Salem increased the percentage of clients receiving public assistance. The implementation research found that VISION increased the likelihood that TANF applications would be accepted, because staff maintained contact with clients longer and actively helped clients navigate the application requirements. Year 1 TANF payments were \$365 (or 19 percent) higher

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Table ES.1**  
**Year 1, Impacts on UI-Covered Employment and Earnings**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
<b><u>Year 1</u></b>				
Ever employed (%)	62.6	62.8	-0.3	0.903
Average quarterly employment (%)	39.8	42.3	-2.5	0.188
Number of quarters employed	1.6	1.7	-0.1	0.188
Employed 4 consecutive quarters (%)	19.2	21.9	-2.8	0.176
Total earnings (\$)	3,831	4,101	-271	0.346
Earned over \$10,000 (%)	15.0	16.4	-1.4	0.451
<b><u>Last quarter of Year 1</u></b>				
Ever employed (%)	39.8	42.1	-2.4	0.331
Total earnings (\$)	1,136	1,193	-58	0.550
Sample size (total = 1,504)	742	762		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from UI administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: Estimates are regression-adjusted using ordinary least squares, controlling for sample member characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating sums and differences.

This table includes only employment and earnings in jobs covered by the Oregon unemployment insurance (UI) program. It does not include employment outside Oregon or in jobs not covered by UI (for example, "off-the-books" jobs, some agricultural jobs, and federal government jobs).

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between outcomes for the program and control groups.

"Year 1" refers to Quarters 2 to 5. Quarter 1 is the quarter in which random assignment took place.

Dollar averages include zero values for sample members who were not employed or were not receiving TANF or food stamps.

The p-value indicates the degree of likelihood that the difference between the program and control group arose by chance.

The average quarterly employment measure was computed by adding up the number of quarters employed and dividing by the total number of quarters potentially employed.

Random assignment extended from May 2002 through May 2004. The full research sample includes all single parents who were randomly assigned in Salem. Employment and earnings outcomes are available for the full research sample. One year of follow-up on outcomes of public assistance are available only for those randomly assigned from May 2002 through September 2003.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Table ES.2**  
**Year 1, Impacts on Public Assistance and Measured Income**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
Ever received TANF (%)	64.1	58.5	5.6 *	0.074
Amount of TANF received (\$)	2,319	1,954	365 **	0.014
Ever received food stamps (%)	94.1	93.6	0.5	0.720
Amount of food stamps received (\$)	2,739	2,579	160 **	0.044
Number of months receiving TANF	4.9	4.1	0.8 ***	0.008
Number of months receiving food stamps	9.6	9.2	0.4 *	0.077
Total measured income <sup>a</sup>	8,546	8,138	409	0.243
<b><u>Last quarter of Year 1</u></b>				
Ever received TANF (%)	39.5	32.3	7.2 **	0.017
Amount of TANF received (\$)	495	400	96 **	0.022
Ever received food stamps (%)	77.9	74.0	3.9	0.142
Amount of food stamps received (\$)	626	566	60 **	0.025
Combinations of work and welfare receipt (%)				
Employed, not receiving TANF	27.2	32.1	-4.9 *	0.093
Employed, receiving TANF	10.5	8.6	1.9	0.321
Not employed, receiving TANF	29.0	23.7	5.4 *	0.053
Not employed, not receiving TANF	33.3	35.7	-2.4	0.435
Received no measured income <sup>a</sup> (%)	13.8	17.6	-3.8	0.102
Sample size (total = 977)	478	499		

(continued)

## Table ES.2 (continued)

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from UI, TANF, and food stamp administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: This table includes only employment and earnings in jobs covered by the Oregon unemployment insurance (UI) program. It does not include employment outside Oregon or in jobs not covered by UI (for example, "off-the-books" jobs, some agricultural jobs, and federal government jobs).

<sup>a</sup>Total measured income represents the sum of unemployment insurance (UI) earnings, TANF, and food stamps for the ERA group.

Estimates were regression-adjusted using ordinary least squares, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics of sample members.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating sums and differences.

"Year 1" refers to Quarters 2 to 5. Quarter 1 is the quarter in which random assignment took place.

Dollar averages include zero values for sample members who were not employed or were not receiving TANF or food stamps.

The p-value indicates the degree of likelihood that the difference between the program and control groups arose by chance.

Random assignment extended from May 2002 through May 2004. The full research sample includes all single parents who were randomly assigned in Salem. Employment and earnings outcomes are available for the full research sample. One year of follow-up on outcomes of public assistance are available only for those randomly assigned from May 2002 through September 2003.

among VISION group members, compared with the JOBS group average of \$1,954. VISION group members were almost 6 percentage points more likely to have ever received TANF than JOBS group members. VISION group members also received \$160 more in food stamp payments than the JOBS group average of \$2,579 in Year 1. The increase in food stamp receipt is a positive impact — particularly in Oregon, which was considered one of the “hungriest” states in the nation when VISION started. VISION also increased public (and overall) health insurance coverage, which could be a byproduct of increasing TANF receipt and overall efforts to help clients with eligibility issues.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Though a one-year follow-up period is far from definitive, so far the employment, retention, and advancement impacts of the VISION program are not encouraging. Overall, it seems that a combination of factors made it difficult for VISION to achieve its goals.

- **Program operators indicated that a pre- to postemployment model of retention and advancement was difficult to implement. Furthermore, staff**

**had a difficult time understanding how to operationalize advancement in the context of everyday services.**

The program model appears to require a great deal of specialization and staff. Making the same staff responsible for both pre- and postemployment issues may have been possible only with very small caseloads. With large caseloads, job placement and reemployment naturally take priority over job retention and career advancement.

VISION's program design would likely have been more successful had staff been equally comfortable and skilled in providing both the retention and the advancement service components. The postemployment component was most fully implemented late in the evaluation period, and there were some increases in participation in retention and advancement services. Thus, VISION may have benefited if staff had first had a chance to understand and gain experience in the less familiar advancement component. This might have encouraged VISION case managers to buy into the concept of advancement in general and might have allowed the training and employment specialists to build confidence in their career-coaching abilities.

- **A challenging external environment can prevent a program model from being implemented as intended.**

A weak economy, state staffing cutbacks, staff turnover, a hiring freeze, and management staff whose time was divided among a number of competing duties impacted the VISION program throughout the evaluation. The hiring freeze affected both clients and caseworkers. Clients were unable to find jobs in the public sector — a major employer of former welfare recipients in Salem — and staff became overextended and burned-out as program positions went unfilled. In addition, VISION was evaluated against a competing program, JOBS, that had a strong work-first focus. While it may be that, in difficult external circumstances, a program like VISION is unlikely to generate impacts, other ERA sites that have attempted to work with clients both before and after employment have also had serious operational difficulties, even under better circumstances.

- **It is important to account for institutional differences when merging line staff of partner organizations.**

Conflicting work cultures and philosophies came into play when merging community college and welfare staff in the Salem ERA program. VISION managers not only had to align partner organizations but also had to account for the different environments and operating cultures to which staff were accustomed. Facilitating communication and establishing clearer program boundaries up-front may have helped.

\* \* \*

It is likely that some combination of the factors discussed above contributed to the weak impacts of the VISION program, compared with the JOBS program, to date. However, these results are not the final word on the ERA program in Salem. MDRC will continue to track the impacts of VISION using unemployment insurance records.



## Introduction

This report presents interim results for the Salem site in the national Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project. Conceived and funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and also supported by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the ERA project is testing innovative program models across the county that aim to promote steady work and career advancement for current and former welfare recipients and other low-wage workers. MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, is conducting the ERA project under contract to ACF, and is producing a similar interim report for each site in the project.

The Salem ERA program, which operated from May 2002 through May 2004, targeted individuals applying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance benefits who were unemployed.<sup>1</sup> The ERA program was designed to help participants — mostly single mothers — secure more and better-than-usual initial job placements and then advance in the labor market.

The program was jointly administered by staff from the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) — specifically, the Children and Adult Family Services Division — and Chemeketa Community College. While it did receive some additional funds for its specialized ERA services, the program was primarily funded within DHS's larger contract for regular welfare-to-work services.

This section provides background information on the national ERA project, the Salem site, and the research design for the project.

### Overview of the National ERA Project

For over a decade, policymakers and program operators have struggled to learn what kinds of services, supports, and incentives are best able to help low-income working parents retain steady employment and move up to better jobs. This issue has assumed even greater urgency in the wake of the 1990s welfare reforms, which made long-term welfare receipt much less feasible for families. Despite many efforts, scant evidence exists about effective strategies to promote employment retention and advancement. Previously evaluated programs that were aimed at improving retention or advancement — notably, the Post-Employment Services Demonstration (PESD), a four-site project that tested programs, including one in Oregon, that pro-

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<sup>1</sup>Prior to the full demonstration, Salem operated a pilot ERA program from February through April 2002.

vided follow-up case management to welfare recipients who found jobs — generally failed to improve employment outcomes.

The Employment Retention and Advancement project was designed to improve on past efforts in this area by identifying and testing innovative models designed to promote employment stability and wage progression among welfare recipients and other low-income groups. The project began in 1998, when ACF of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued planning grants to 13 states to develop new programs. The following year, HHS selected MDRC to conduct an evaluation of the ERA programs.<sup>2</sup> From 2000 to 2003, MDRC and its subcontractor, The Lewin Group, worked closely with the states that had received planning grants, and with several other states, to mount tests of ERA programs. MDRC, Lewin, and Cygnet Associates also provided extensive technical assistance to some of the states and program operators, since most were starting the project from scratch, with no proven models on which to build.

Ultimately, a total of 16 ERA models were implemented in eight states. Almost all the programs targeted current or former recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) — the cash welfare program that mainly serves single mothers and their children — but the program models are very diverse. One group of programs targets low-wage workers and focuses on advancement. Another group targets individuals who are considered “hard to employ” and primarily aims to place them in stable jobs. Finally, a third group of programs has mixed goals and targets a diverse set of populations, including former TANF recipients, TANF applicants, and low-wage workers in particular firms. Some of these programs initiate services before individuals go to work, while others begin services after employment. Each model is described in Appendix Table A.1.

The evaluation design is similar in most of the sites. Individuals who met ERA eligibility criteria (which varied from site to site) were assigned, at random, to the program group — in Salem’s case, the VISION group — or to the control group, which in Salem was the regular welfare-to-work program, the Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program. Members of the ERA group were recruited for the ERA program (and, in sites like Salem, were required to participate in it), whereas members of the control group were not eligible for ERA services. The extent and nature of the services and supports available to the control group varied across the ERA sites. The random assignment process ensured that any differences in outcomes that emerged between the two research groups during the follow-up period can be confidently attributed to the ERA program, rather than to differences in the characteristics of the people in the groups.

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<sup>2</sup>The U.S. Department of Labor has also provided funding to support the ERA project.

## The Salem ERA Program

### Origins and Goals of the Salem ERA Program

In recent decades, Oregon has strived for a higher level of service integration among its state and local agencies, and, throughout the 1990s, the state had led efforts to improve its workforce development services. With the onset of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the consequent establishment of a network of One-Stop Career Centers, Oregon recognized the importance of integrating its state social service and workforce programs.<sup>3</sup> In 1999, Oregon chose to include its TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and food stamp programs as mandatory WIA partners. In addition, Oregon's Department of Human Services (DHS) reorganized its service delivery areas to correspond with the WIA workforce regions. The idea was that such reorganization would facilitate local collaboration and improve service coordination and referrals (that is, to TANF, food stamps, child care, child welfare programs, and the Oregon Health Plan).

In Salem, specifically, the welfare, workforce, and community college systems had worked closely together — literally — to deliver employment-related services through WIA and through JOBS, the state's welfare-to-work program.<sup>4</sup> Chemeketa Community College, Salem's local community college, had been a significant partner and key player in the city's workforce-welfare relationship. Winema Career Center, one of Salem's One-Stop Centers and home to WIA services and partners, was operated under the college's auspices.<sup>5</sup> In addition to delivering WIA services, Chemeketa staff were also contracted to provide the employment services in JOBS. While there were later frustrations that resulted from conflicting institutional philosophies and benchmarks, DHS and Chemeketa were a part of a one-stop regional network "considered to be among the most integrated and mature. . . . [T]he major partners have agreed to a level of coordination in the centers that is not seen elsewhere in the state."<sup>6</sup> (The frustrations and conflicts are described in the next major section, entitled "Implementation of the ERA Program in Salem.")

As mandated by the state, all welfare applicants, unless exempt, could be required to participate in a 45-day job search period, called the "assessment period," before the opening of their TANF grants. The JOBS program provided applicants with job search services during that time, and participants worked with a case manager and an employment consultant. Case man-

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<sup>3</sup>The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 authorized funding for employment and training services and programs through a system of One-Stop Career centers.

<sup>4</sup>Winema Career Center was located on the Chemeketa Community College campus and down the street from the main branch of Salem DHS, which was home to the regular welfare-to-work program, JOBS.

<sup>5</sup>Chemeketa Community College is the Mid-Willamette Network's WIA administrator and receives WIA funding to operate the Winema Career Center. In addition to Chemeketa Community College, DHS, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Oregon Employment Department partner with the community college in providing services at the career center.

<sup>6</sup>Leete and Bania (2004).

agers, employed by DHS, were in charge of tracking participation and conducting intake and assessments and were responsible for authorizing supportive services. Employment consultants were Chemeketa staff, contracted by JOBS to deliver the employment-related services. These services included a group of workshops entitled “Employment Express,” which consisted of basic group job search, interview preparation, and résumé development activities.<sup>7</sup> Services and staff were located at the local DHS branch office.

Once clients secured a job, JOBS case managers provided information on them and determined their eligibility for work and transitional supports and TANF. The role of the JOBS employment consultant essentially ended once clients were employed. If clients initiated requests for additional help with job search (such as for a better job) or training, JOBS employment consultants usually referred them to Winema Career Center.

Oregon and Salem DHS had shown an active commitment to workforce retention and advancement, participating in state and federal initiatives and studies. In 2002, the time of ERA’s conception in Salem, Oregon’s DHS offices were required by the state to develop postemployment strategies and activities (and to spend 25 percent of their budgets on such). In Salem, DHS and Chemeketa Community College had been in the midst of a retention initiative that took place at the site of an employer, and they provided participants with supportive services and skills training assistance. The two organizations had also been involved in implementing an advancement program for entry-level state employees, many of whom were former welfare clients.<sup>8</sup>

These various experiences and the existing JOBS program all contributed to the ultimate design of the Salem ERA program, which is described below. Salem had identified the importance of engaging employers for the purposes of retention and advancement, and, consequently, a key goal of Salem’s ERA program was to develop strategies for employer involvement. Salem had also concluded that a strong client-staff relationship was integral to clients’ participation and the success of the program — hence, the idea that ERA services, if begun prior to employment, would positively impact initial job placement, retention, and advancement. The test would be whether such a model would help participants fare better in the labor market than those who went through JOBS.

### **The Salem ERA Model**

Of the four ERA sites located in Oregon, the Salem ERA program was the only one designed to begin serving clients prior to their employment.<sup>9</sup> Called “VISION” (Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now), the program provided TANF applicants with job

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<sup>7</sup>The title of the workshop was later changed to “POWER.”

<sup>8</sup>Clymer, Roberts, and Strawn (2001).

<sup>9</sup>Eugene, Medford, and Portland are the other three ERA sites in Oregon.

search and placement services, including workshops that focused on future job retention and career paths. Then, once clients secured employment, VISION continued with postemployment services that promoted retention and advancement.

In creating the VISION program, it was natural to build on the established relationships among the local DHS office, Winema Career Center, and Chemeketa Community College. The program was jointly managed by Oregon DHS and Chemeketa. Services were offered at the Winema Career Center by a number of partner agencies, including the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, DHS, the Employment Department, and Chemeketa Community College.

Staff worked with both employed and unemployed clients, and each VISION client worked with a case manager employed by DHS and with a training and employment specialist employed by Chemeketa Community College. In addition to job search and placement services, VISION training and employment specialists were also in charge of retention and career advancement. VISION case managers were responsible for all eligibility issues — TANF, food stamps, child care, transportation, and the Oregon Health Plan. They were also the ones who could authorize emergency payments if necessary. Winema Career Center was designated the physical home for VISION services and for both types of staff. Although the two types of staff had some distinctive responsibilities, VISION emphasized a customer-oriented model; thus, VISION staff were presented to clients as a team, any one of whom they could approach for help.

VISION was designed to provide TANF applicants with more than the basic preemployment services provided in JOBS. VISION intended to help clients identify and work toward a job of interest and to continue to do so once they became employed, regardless of their eligibility for TANF. VISION infused its preemployment job search services with messages and activities related to advancement, including creating workshops that focused on keys to job retention and career goals. Once clients secured a job, postemployment services were scheduled to begin within a week of the new employment. Staff were to accommodate clients' schedules and locations, meeting clients at sites other than their offices at the Career Center. The goal for the postemployment phase was to ensure that clients retained their jobs and began progressing toward the career and advancement goals that they had identified prior to their employment.

Thus, retention and advancement were emphasized from the onset of the program, and the same staff worked with clients both before and after their employment. The reasons behind this design were threefold: (1) to introduce the idea of job retention to clients prior to job placement, (2) to encourage clients to think about career goals and advancement early on, and (3) to establish a rapport that would ensure clients' long-term engagement and, therefore, participation in VISION's postemployment services.

In contrast, the JOBS program focused on job placement and was not designed to serve people once they were employed. Although Oregon disregarded 50 percent of a TANF reci-

ipient's earned income in calculating benefits, most who found employment were ineligible for assistance because of the state's high minimum wage; therefore, postemployment follow-up and contact were essentially nonexistent.<sup>10</sup> In addition, while JOBS participants had access to assistance at the Career Center, few of them reportedly took advantage of the its resources. Finally, in contrast to VISION's staffing structure, which had the two types of staff sharing responsibilities, JOBS staff had a clear division of responsibilities. Table 1 presents a comparison of the VISION and JOBS program models as they were designed. How the VISION model deviated from this original design and how the program was actually implemented are described in the next major section, "Implementation of the ERA Program in Salem."

### **Characteristics of the Salem ERA Site and Its External Environment**

The Salem ERA program operated from May 2002 through May 2004, and, during this time, Oregon's economy was often named the "worst" in the country.<sup>11</sup> While Oregon has consistently had a higher unemployment rate than the national average, after the 2001 recession, the state suffered from particularly high unemployment rates. In 2003, the national unemployment rate hit a high of 6 percent; in comparison, Oregon's unemployment rate in 2003 ranged from a *low* of 7.7 percent to a high of 8.5.<sup>12</sup>

Salem's unemployment rates followed suit: When VISION was launched in 2002, Salem's annual unemployment rate was 8.6 percent — an increase from 6.3 percent the previous year.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Salem's labor market had not been abundant in "better" jobs to begin with; it mainly comprised service sector and entry-level jobs with few promotional opportunities.

From 2001 to 2003, Oregon's TANF caseload increased almost 14 percent — from approximately 16,000 cases to 18,000 cases in September 2003.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, funds for the TANF program were being reallocated to support other programs.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, emergency assistance and other ancillary support funds had to be eliminated, and, in June 2002, Oregon's governor implemented a hiring freeze on state jobs that affected VISION's clients and staff in several ways. First, the program was unable to fill its case manager vacancies, and, due to the high level of turnover, VISION was often left understaffed and overwhelmed.

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<sup>10</sup>Oregon's minimum wage ranged from \$6.50 to \$6.90 per hour through most of VISION's operations. Beginning in 2004, the state's minimum wage increased to \$7.50 per hour, with annual adjustments for inflation that raised it to \$7.80 per hour in 2007.

<sup>11</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006a).

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006b).

<sup>13</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006c).

<sup>14</sup>Center for Law and Social Policy (2004). In comparison, the national caseload decreased by almost 4 percent.

<sup>15</sup>Funds for the TANF program had remained the same since 1996.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Table 1**

**Comparison of the VISION Model and the JOBS Model**

Feature	VISION Model (ERA Group Program)	JOBS Model (Control Group Program)
Goals	Job placement; job retention and career advancement	Job placement
Message	“Dream job” Help clients identify and work toward a career of interest	“Work first” No focus on “dream job” or on retention and advancement
Primary location	Winema Career Center	Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) offices
Staff roles	Overlapping responsibilities between DHS case managers and Chemeketa Community College training and employment specialists Same staff for both pre- and postemployment services	Clearly delineated roles for DHS case managers and Chemeketa Community College employment consultants
Employer involvement	Establish partnership with State of Oregon and private employers for purposes of job development and retention and advancement	Limited contact with employers for purposes of job development or retention and advancement
<b><u>Preemployment phase</u></b> (includes a DHS assessment period that could last up to 45 days) <sup>a</sup>		
Customer contact	2-3 times per week	Weekly contact monitored by DHS case managers
Job search and career-planning services	One-on-one meetings and VISION-specific workshops; focus on skills, career interests and goals, and future job retention; direct link to and assistance with services at Winema Career Center Business Specialists and WIA-funded VISION staff together identify jobs with career tracks	“Employment Express/POWER” workshops; focus on basic job search, interview preparation, résumé development; referrals to services at Winema Career Center  Limited efforts to assist with job search or identify jobs with career tracks
<b><u>Postemployment phase</u></b>		
Client contact	Meeting within 1 week of new job (preferably treat client to lunch); weekly contact for first 30 days; biweekly contact for 30 to 90 days	Little contact with clients; only at client’s request

(continued)

**Table 1 (continued)**

Feature	VISION Model (ERA Group Program)	JOBS Model (Control Group Program)
<b><u>Postemployment phase (continued)</u></b>		
Job retention, education, and advancement services	<p data-bbox="548 415 1150 574">Continued case management services, meetings with training and employment specialists and access to Career Center resources; focus on job retention, job search for better jobs, on-the-job/educational advancement; ensure that clients receive all DHS-funded public benefits for which they are eligible</p> <p data-bbox="548 607 1104 656">Contact client’s employer within 30 days of new job to get employer’s support for client’s advancement goals</p> <p data-bbox="548 688 1150 764">Involve education and training providers in VISION; work with clients to explore options; offer any available incentives (such as day-planners, donated computers)</p>	<p data-bbox="1184 415 1656 440">Not designed to provide postemployment services</p> <p data-bbox="1184 472 1824 574">Address public benefits at point of employment and recertification; referrals to Winema Career Center if employed clients request assistance with additional job search or educational or professional advancement</p>

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NOTE: <sup>a</sup>Oregon’s welfare-to-work program, JOBS, included job search and was mandatory except for those who were exempt (for example, clients with medical conditions or late-term pregnancies).



Second, VISION had hoped to work with the State of Oregon — Salem’s largest employer and the one with the greatest number of entry-level jobs that had advancement opportunities. However, because of the budget shortfall and hiring freeze, VISION’s goal of helping participants secure jobs and move up in the public sector was never realized. Even as the workforce in Oregon grew larger, the number of state jobs decreased.

Third, Oregon was identified as one of the “hungriest” states in the nation from 2000 to 2002.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the state implemented a very active and aggressive food stamp outreach program, with the goal of reaching every food stamp-eligible Oregonian, and it employed a new food stamp policy, which allowed an individual whose TANF grant was closed due to employment to receive five additional months of food stamp benefits that did not take into account the new source of income.

### **The Salem ERA Target Population**

The VISION program targeted low-income families who had children and who were potentially eligible for TANF — specifically, those served by the branch offices of DHS in North and South Salem.<sup>17</sup> People were assigned into the program when they first applied for aid and prior to the 45-day job search period (assessment period), which was mandatory for all except those who were exempt from participating.<sup>18</sup> In JOBS, people who were determined to be exempt from job search were not required to participate in work-related activities; in VISION, however, those who were exempt remained as part of the staff’s caseload and were included in the program’s outreach and service delivery efforts.

Table 2 presents selected characteristics of the single parent sample members at baseline, or their time of random assignment. Approximately 83 percent were single-parent families (not shown). The sample members seem to have been fairly “job-ready”: 45 percent had been employed for more than two of the past three years. Most spoke English as their primary language, and the Salem sample is better educated than most other ERA research samples: Less than a third lacked some kind of education credential. Most had less than two years of prior TANF receipt, and 41 percent of the sample had never received TANF assistance. The typical sample member is female and white and was in her late twenties when she entered the study.

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<sup>16</sup>Nord, Andrews, and Carlson (2003).

<sup>17</sup>In Salem, random assignment was conducted after TANF applicants were screened and found to be potentially eligible for TANF. It was not uncommon for VISION staff to determine that clients were not eligible after random assignment had occurred, when sitting down with them during the first meeting to review their applications. Applicants could be determined as ineligible, for example, because they had failed to disclose child support payments that put them over the income ceiling.

<sup>18</sup>While some people who did not find jobs at the end of the 45-day job search period ended up ineligible for TANF, staff reported that their number was not considerable.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Table 2**  
**Selected Characteristics of Sample Members at Baseline**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Characteristic	Total
Gender (%)	
Female	89.6
U.S. citizenship (%)	98.3
Primary language (%)	
English	97.5
Spanish	1.6
Other	0.9
Race/ethnicity (%)	
White, non-Hispanic	70.3
Black, non-Hispanic	2.7
American Indian, Alaska native, Asian/Pacific islander	4.9
Hispanic	15.4
Other	6.7
Age (%)	
Younger than 20	9.4
21-30	51.8
31-40	27.7
Older than 40	11.0
Average age (years)	29.5
Education (%)	
General Educational Development (GED) certificate	27.7
High school diploma	31.1
Technical certificate/associate's degree/2-year college program	7.5
4 years (or more) of college	2.2
None of the above	31.5
Housing status (%)	
Rent, public housing	6.2
Rent, subsidized housing	11.6
Rent, other (unsubsidized)	42.3
Own home or apartment	2.9
Emergency or temporary housing	26.1
Other, living with friends/relatives	11.0

(continued)

**Table 2 (continued)**

Characteristic	Total
Current cash assistance status (%)	
Applicant	99.9
Recipient	0.1
Registration status (%)	
Mandatory	89.8
Exempt <sup>a</sup>	10.2
Total prior AFDC/TANF receipt (%)	
None	41.3
Less than 3 months	6.7
3 months or more and less than 2 years	31.8
2 years or more and less than 5 years	14.1
5 years or more and less than 10 years	5.9
10 years or more	0.1
Months employed in past 3 years (%)	
0 (Did not work)	10.6
6 or less	11.4
7 to 12	16.0
13 to 24	17.2
More than 24	44.8
Currently employed (%)	9.4
Number of children (%)	
0	4.3
1	45.7
2	31.3
3 or more	18.7
Age of youngest child (%)	
2 or younger	41.4
3 to 5	23.2
6 or older	35.4
<hr/>	
Sample size (total = 1,504)	

SOURCE: Baseline information form.

NOTE: <sup>a</sup>In contrast to JOBS, Oregon's regular welfare-to-work program, VISION actively engaged clients and provided services to those who were deemed to be medically exempt.

## About the ERA Evaluation in Salem

### The Research Design

#### Research Questions

The ERA evaluation focuses on the implementation of the sites' programs and their effects, or "impacts." Key questions addressed in this report are summarized below.

- **Implementation.** How did DHS and Chemeketa Community College manage and execute the ERA program? What services and messages did VISION provide and emphasize? How was this different from JOBS, the regular welfare-to-work program? How did VISION staff spend their time?
- **Participation.** Did VISION succeed in engaging a substantial proportion of individuals in services? What types of services did people receive? What were possible reasons for nonparticipation? To what extent did the program increase service levels above the levels that would "normally" be received, as represented by the control group's behavior? What were people's expectations about VISION's services, and how did these expectations align with their actual experiences?
- **Impacts.** Within the follow-up period, did VISION increase employment and earnings, lead to employment stability and wage growth, and improve job characteristics for the VISION group, relative to the control group? Did the program have any effects on participants' use of public assistance or on their total income?

#### The Random Assignment Process

Starting in May 2002, potentially eligible TANF applicants entering the participating Salem DHS welfare offices who met the criteria for normal welfare-to-work services were assigned, at random, to either the VISION group or the JOBS group, with 50 percent being assigned to each group.<sup>19</sup> Sample members were notified of their research status by the random assignment clerk, who explained the ERA study and gave clients written material describing the project. Figure 1 presents an overview of the service flow and the random assignment process in Salem.

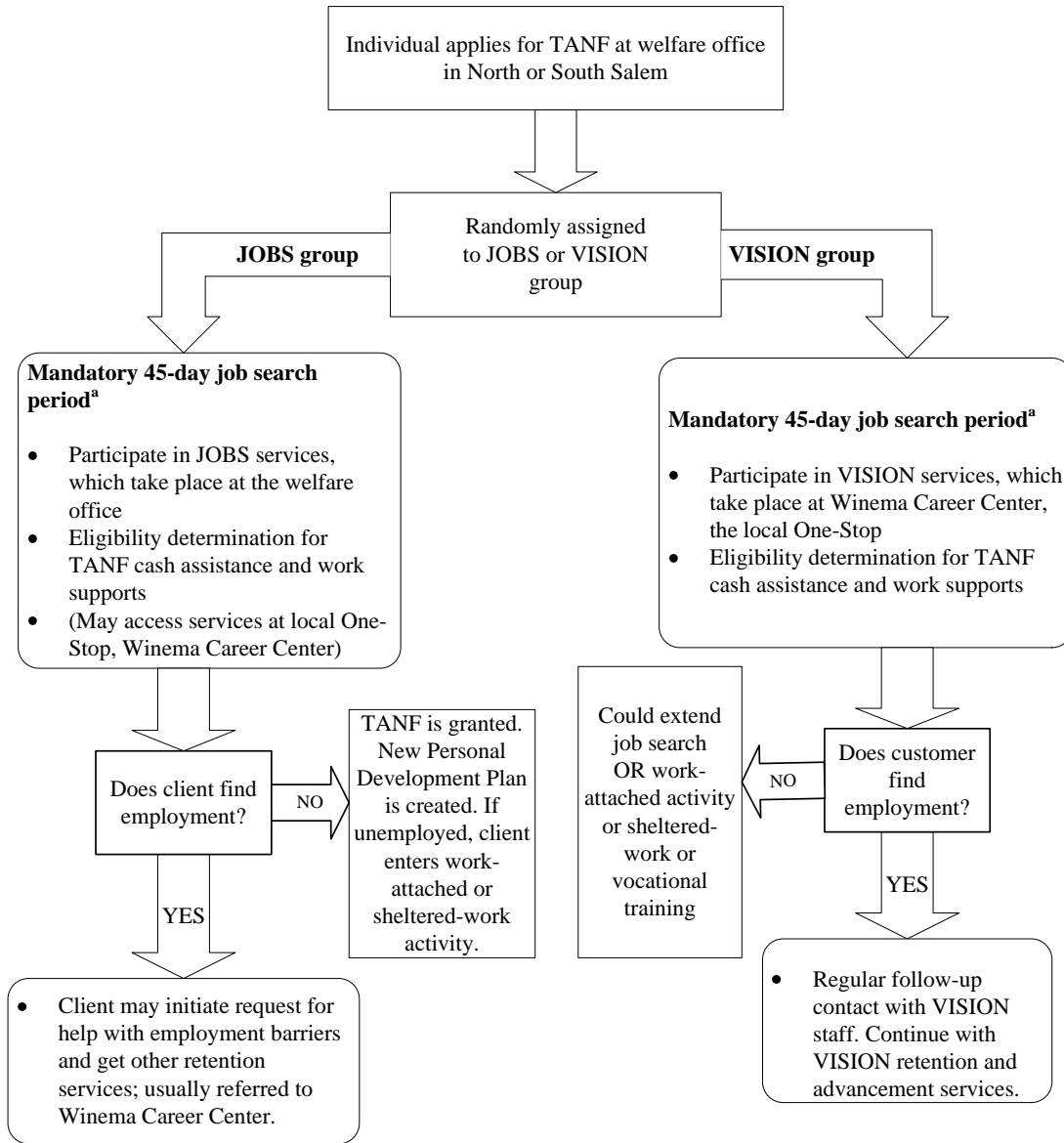
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<sup>19</sup>The following categories of TANF applicants were excluded from the random assignment process: anyone receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI); nonparent households (defined as someone applying for TANF for a dependent child related to them but not asking for TANF for themselves); teen parents (19 years old or younger); and ineligible citizens (defined as someone who is an adult and a noncitizen but who may be applying for TANF for their U.S.-born children).

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Figure 1**

**Overview of Service Flow in Salem**



NOTE: <sup>a</sup>All applicants, unless exempt, were required to participate in job search activities prior to the onset of TANF. This period of time was called the “assessment period,” and it could last up to 45 days.

Individuals who were assigned to the VISION group would meet with a VISION case manager and, usually, a VISION training and employment specialist as well. During this time, staff reiterated the benefits of the program to the client, focusing on the job placement services as well as VISION's retention and advancement services once the client was employed. The VISION team would also begin completing a Personal Development Plan (PDP) for the client, which reflected the client's short- and long-term career goals and the tasks needed to achieve those goals. The idea was that the PDP would be updated as often as needed.

VISION group members were also referred to a VISION orientation, during which staff administered a short "needs assessment" and the Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI). The needs assessment was a DHS form that asked clients about special needs (medical, mental health, domestic violence, or substance abuse issues) that had to be addressed or they would affect participation in services. SASSI is an industry-recognized assessment tool, a questionnaire that screens for possible substance abuse issues. Clients with a potential problem were referred to a counselor who conducted further assessment and referred them to substance abuse services if necessary. Usually, the PDP was written to reflect the client's participation in these services. All other assessments were administered on an as-needed basis.

#### The Counterfactual: What Is VISION Being Compared With?

Individuals who were randomly assigned to the control group — who represent the counterfactual for the study — were told about the ERA study by DHS staff. Staff explained that, as part of the evaluation, these individuals were selected to be part of a group that would receive the current, standard employment services offered by DHS (in the JOBS program), while another group would receive services from the new ERA program, VISION. Control group members were informed that their TANF, food stamp, Medicaid, and unemployment insurance (UI) records would be tracked and that they could be contacted to participate in surveys.

Members who were assigned to the control group went through the regular welfare-to-work program, JOBS, which is described above. Like all welfare applicants, control group members — except those identified as exempt — were mandated to participate in the 45-day job search period. During that time, JOBS participants worked with a case manager and an employment consultant.

The JOBS case manager conducted intake and completed the client's Personal Development Plan (PDP). Unlike the VISION staff, the JOBS staff rarely revisited a client's PDP to update and revise its goals prior to the opening of the client's TANF grant. The JOBS client was then referred to a JOBS employment consultant and attended POWER — the orientation to the job search program — and began participating in JOBS employment services.

As described above, the JOBS program was housed at the welfare office, and there was minimal contact with clients after employment unless the clients initiated requests. While JOBS participants were free to access services at Winema Career Center, take-up of such services was reportedly low. Furthermore, the Career Center (outside of VISION) did not offer much in terms of retention services for participants who were not registered for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) services. While retention services were offered for those who enrolled in WIA, it was unlikely that JOBS participants would enroll.

## **Data Sources**

The data sources for the analyses presented in the report are described below.

### **Baseline Data**

Monthly, after each round of random assignment, MDRC collected data on sample members' demographic characteristics from the MDRC random assignment module. This information was used to describe the two main research groups in the study (see Appendix Table A.2) and to identify subgroups that are analyzed separately.

### **Administrative Records**

Effects on employment and earnings were computed using automated unemployment insurance (UI) wage records data, and effects on public assistance were computed using automated TANF and food stamp administrative records. One year of follow-up data was available for all sample members when the analyses for this report were conducted for the full research sample (in the case of UI data) and for those randomly assigned through September 2003 (in the case of public assistance data). All the analyses that were conducted using administrative records include single parents only.<sup>20</sup>

### **Program Participation and Implementation Data**

VISION provided MDRC with data on sample members' participation in program activities. MDRC conducted a "time study" of ERA and JOBS staff, which tracked their activities. Information on program operations was obtained from interviews with VISION and JOBS staff and from reviews of participants' case files. In addition, MDRC conducted focus groups with VISION participants selected by ERA staff: a group of eight who had participated in VISION, and a group of seven TANF recidivists who had participated in VISION and had previously gone through JOBS as well.

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<sup>20</sup>There were too few sample members in two-parent families to permit a reliable analysis, but the general pattern of impacts is similar for both single- and two-parent families in the research sample.

## The ERA 12-Month Survey

Information about sample members' participation in program services and about their employment, income, and other program outcomes was gathered by the ERA 12-Month Survey, which was administered to a subset of ERA and control group members approximately 12 months after random assignment.

### **Sample Sizes**

A total of 1,820 people were randomly assigned in Salem between May 2002 and May 2004. The fielded 12-month survey sample of 418 was selected from among those sample members who were randomly assigned from May to October 2003. A total of 300 people (72 percent of the fielded sample) completed the survey and are called the "respondent sample." The remaining 118 are called the "nonrespondent sample." For more information about the samples used in this report, please see Appendix E.

### **Roadmap of the Report**

This report focuses on the implementation and impacts of VISION, the ERA program in Salem, Oregon. The next section further describes the VISION program and its implementation. Then the report provides information about the program's impacts on participation and service receipt. The final section describes impacts on employment, earnings, job characteristics, and other outcomes.



# Implementation of the ERA Program in Salem

## Summary

VISION (Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now) — the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) program in Salem, Oregon — provided job search services and workshops focused on job retention and advancement to welfare applicants prior to their employment, and, once participants became employed, it continued with individual retention and advancement services. VISION’s intention was to provide services to employed clients that would help them follow through on the goals they identified during their initial job search period, regardless of their eligibility for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

For reasons detailed in this section, VISION’s postemployment retention and advancement services were not implemented as intended. Postemployment advancement simply was not a focus of the program until after random assignment ended in 2004. In addition, turnover of Oregon Department of Human Services and Chemeketa Community College staff from the ERA program, and conflicting work philosophies between them, contributed to implementation challenges. In the end, the program failed to markedly differentiate itself from the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program, the state’s regular welfare-to-work program; as a result, VISION struggled to engage its working clients in retention and advancement services. Table 3 compares the VISION model as designed and the VISION program as implemented.

Even with these limitations, participants seemed very positive about VISION. The program’s message about long-term goals and advancement and its enhanced customer service were repeatedly named by clients and staff as VISION’s strongest features. Participants agreed that the program was different because “across the street [at the welfare office], you are just a number.” Despite the challenges of the staffing design, for VISION’s participants, the staff support — the “one-on-one” — was what set the ERA program apart from regular welfare-to-work services.

## The Framework of the Salem ERA Program: Structure, Staffing, and Management

- Colocation of staff and the lack of specialization along pre- and postemployment lines were intended to make services seamless and VISION more customer-friendly. However, these aspects of the program often prevented staff from focusing on their employed clients.
- VISION experienced a high level of staff turnover and burnout, especially on the case manager side. Staff turnover resulted in heavy workloads, as vacant

positions were not filled quickly and VISION staff stepped in to assist clients when vacancies occurred.

- Welfare and community college staff entered VISION with different philosophies about program policies and goals, which affected the delivery of services.

### **Organizational and Staffing Structure**

As described in the Introduction, the VISION program was conceived and managed by a partnership between the Children and Adult Family Services Division of the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) and Chemeketa Community College. Services were delivered at Winema Career Center, where participants worked with a VISION case manager employed by DHS and a training and employment specialist employed by Chemeketa. These same staff worked with clients both before and after employment. In total, there were nine such staff providing VISION services.

Initially, VISION staff were selected for the program through a competitive process; interested staff applied for the position and were interviewed by an interview panel.<sup>1</sup> After being selected, all the original staff went through a Career Development Facilitation training course at Chemeketa Community College that included 120 hours of instruction and covered career assessment, job search, labor market analysis, and workshop facilitation. Staff also received training from a consultant retained by MDRC. This training focused on how to market VISION's services to potential participants and how to develop advancement plans, engage clients in retention and advancement services, and work with employers.

Program managers worked well together but were stretched across many commitments, including overseeing other projects and staff. One VISION program manager was located off-site at the DHS office, and so this person was less involved in the daily operations of VISION. Consequently, the program manager who was located on-site at Winema Career Center carried a larger share of the daily management duties, stepping in to assist clients at times when the VISION program was short staffed. During field visits, some staff, especially the DHS case managers, commented that they would have preferred far more on-site supervision. Most VISION staff felt that management could have facilitated a better working relationship between the welfare and community college staff (as discussed below).

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<sup>1</sup>The process for selecting DHS staff changed partway through program implementation. After experiencing turnover in staff, DHS abandoned the staff selection process in favor of identifying volunteers or asking specific staff whether they would be interested in working on VISION. The process for selecting training and employment specialists remained the same throughout the period of program operations.

Staff were designed to operate as a team (see the Introduction) and to work with both employed and unemployed clients. Colocation at Winema Career Center facilitated this team collaboration. Thus, while training and employment specialists and case managers did have somewhat distinct roles, both became responsible for responding to clients' requests about their eligibility, administrative, and other individual needs. Staff worked together to develop a Personal Development Plan (PDP) for each client, to narrate case notes, and to teach workshops. They also met regularly to discuss the clients who were currently on their caseload.

Program managers and staff reported that this staffing structure worked well during the pilot demonstration that VISION operated from February through April 2002. However, once the full program began in May 2002, staff realized that the intensity of services that they had envisioned would not be possible as workloads increased; with the growing number of cases, both the VISION staff and the JOBS staff had an average caseload of 75 clients. The JOBS staff, however, were only responsible for providing preemployment job search services.

Managers and staff had strongly believed that having staff share responsibilities and having them work with clients both before and after employment would provide clients with more customer-friendly, seamless services and would ensure long-term engagement, thus improving the likelihood that clients would retain their jobs and advance. In practice, this lack of specialization created overwhelming workloads for staff and made it difficult to move beyond eligibility issues, individual crises, and other preemployment responsibilities. It became clear that if staff were responsible for both working and nonworking clients, the latter naturally took priority: Nonworking clients needed to meet participation requirements for TANF and were simply more available for services. Demanding drop-in clients — those described by staff as “squeaky-wheel” clients — became a source of great frustration for staff because of the time they took up and the number of employment barriers that they needed to address and resolve. Over the course of the program, the front-desk Workforce Investment Act (WIA) staff at Winema Career Center did become more adept at screening drop-in clients and assisting them with some of their basic requests.

Management responded to workload challenges by specializing some of the staff responsibilities. A VISION case manager was assigned to conduct follow-up calls to employed clients for retention purposes, and a form called “Opportunity Knocks” was mailed to all clients when they found employment. The form was used by the training and employment specialists to start conversations with clients about their career goals. Later on, management created an advancement team composed of a training and employment specialist dedicated to providing retention and advancement services and a case manager focused on working with employed clients. Finally, toward the end of VISION, staff stopped running preemployment workshops, and the program managers transferred unemployed clients who had received more than a year of VISION's services but who were still unemployed to a regular JOBS case manager.

By the end of VISION’s operations, program managers and staff had come full circle in their view of the staffing design. Staff still acknowledged the importance of building rapport but stated that the costs of sharing responsibilities and being in charge of both employed and unemployed clients far outweighed the benefits. Staff suggested that an ideal caseload would have been about 50 to 60 cases. Even with smaller caseloads, staff — especially the training and employment specialists — felt that eligibility and employment functions needed to be clearly separated, and some even suggested that case managers should have remained at the DHS branch office: “It’s too hard; the eligibility part gets in the way of retention and advancement.”

### **Institutional Culture**

As described in the Introduction, DHS and Chemeketa Community College had previously partnered in various capacities, although most of their collaboration centered on services provided through JOBS,<sup>2</sup> and there was a minimal history of collaboration on WIA services. Through their collaboration on JOBS, the DHS and Chemeketa staff (who delivered JOBS services) were accustomed to TANF benchmarks, which were based primarily on job placements, whereas Chemeketa WIA staff adhered to the benchmarks of the Workforce Investment Act, which were based on entered employment, retention, and wage progression. Program managers acknowledged that the target populations of the two programs rarely overlapped. WIA seldom served those clients in the JOBS program who were “hard to employ” or most in need, because to do so made it difficult to meet WIA’s retention and wage-progression goals. Another factor was that DHS staff rarely referred clients to WIA, because of the perception that WIA was a training program that put everyone into longer-term training.

However, the scope of VISION was broader than that of both the WIA and the JOBS programs. VISION was designed to deliver retention and advancement services within the parameters of the welfare system — a new and difficult pursuit. Unlike WIA, VISION included the “hard-to-employ” TANF population; unlike JOBS, it aimed to help people with more than their immediate job search needs. Thus, the two types of staff struggled to reconcile their different work cultures and philosophies. The DHS case managers had a more difficult time transitioning, as they came from a culture governed by clear processes and responsibilities and by measures of participation that could be quantified. They had to adjust to a customer-service environment in which staff worked as a team and roles were not specialized, and they had to adopt a mission of career advancement in place of the traditional “work-first” philosophy. For example, the training and employment specialists stressed that seeing drop-in clients was a key component of enhanced customer service; case managers — who were not accustomed to seeing clients immediately and so often — disagreed and stated that drop-in clients were too disruptive.

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<sup>2</sup>Chemeketa has a prime contract with DHS to deliver JOBS services.

Such institutional differences most often resulted in disagreements about the provision of supportive services or emergency funds. On the Chemeketa side, training and employment specialists often expressed that case managers were not responding to clients' needs and could be more flexible and generous in providing assistance. On the DHS side, the case managers stated that their job was made more difficult because the training and employment specialists did not understand state eligibility rules and the program regulations by which they had to abide. As one case manager stated, "The Chemeketa staff [training and employment specialists] had a hard time keeping the program straight."

The challenges of merging welfare and community college staff both contributed to and were exacerbated by the high level of staff turnover and burnout that VISION experienced, especially on the case manager side. This was due to growing caseloads, staff promotions, and the restrictive budgetary environment that prevented the hiring of new staff to fill vacancies (discussed in the Introduction). Every time MDRC visited the site, there was a new complement of staff. During the period when there were staff vacancies, clients were shuttled back-and-forth among the existing staff, and it appears that some may have slipped through the cracks. As an example, in one meeting that MDRC observed (which did not represent a widespread experience), a client had been reassigned to a different case manager and, somewhere in the process, VISION had lost track of the individual.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the client's application had expired, and she was in danger of having to restart the 45-day job search process. While this may not have been a common experience for most clients, staff turnover and the higher caseloads that resulted contributed to the stress and burnout that staff experienced, especially since there were times when Chemeketa staff tried to step in to assist a client with eligibility issues, which were less familiar to them.

Staff turnover disrupted not only service delivery but also staff's overall commitment to VISION's goals. The original staff had been committed to the idea of a retention and advancement program and had been trained accordingly, but this commitment and training were lost as staff entered and exited the program at various times. VISION was constantly trying to integrate new staff into the program and to acquire some level of commitment. Case managers already had a more difficult time "buying into" customer service and advancement, and, according to a training and employment specialist, case managers were unable "to get the training or time to adjust — or some just couldn't adjust — to the mindset of the project."

Toward the end of the program, both DHS case managers and the Chemeketa training and employment specialists reported that they had gained a better understanding of each other's work styles and cultures. Given that the VISION model was complex and difficult to imple-

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<sup>3</sup>This was a meeting with a client who had previously gone through intake but had lost contact with VISION during the job search, assessment period.

ment, program managers may have become better able over time to prepare the two types of staff to work with each other. Most staff stated that management could have facilitated communication, and some suggested team-building and conflict-resolution workshops. All suggested ongoing training for both new hires and existing staff, in order to establish and reinforce the VISION model.

This suggests that it is important for program managers to account for and resolve the different mindsets and work cultures that can exist among staff of partnering organizations. VISION had been designed to give staff the discretion and flexibility to help clients as they saw fit or as needs arose, but this also meant that staff had conflicting opinions about the type of additional help that was appropriate and when it was needed. Thus, program managers may have helped staff better communicate and negotiate with each other about such gray areas, particularly the provision of supportive services or emergency funds. Case managers may have felt less misunderstood, and training and employment specialists may not have not felt that case managers were preventing clients from moving forward.

## **Funding**

As noted in the Introduction to this report, Oregon's economic environment and the consequent statewide hiring freeze affected the type of job opportunities available to VISION's clients as well as the program's staffing capacity.

The services and supports that VISION provided to clients were adequately funded over the duration of the program. Child care was available as long as a client had a current Personal Development Plan (PDP). Once the plan expired, the child care funding did as well, although it was staff's responsibility to make sure that VISION clients had current PDPs for a period of one year following random assignment so that they could continue to receive child care. When a client found a job, child care was available, but the client was required to contribute to its cost through a copayment based on income. According to case managers, the supply of child care in Salem was sufficient, with the exception of child care for children who were ill.

As for transportation, clients who were in the initial job search phase received money for either gasoline or their bus fare, as long as they were actively participating in VISION services. Once a client began work, transportation funding was available as needed (usually until the first or second paycheck), providing the client participated in the program's postemployment services.

## **The Services and Messages of the Salem ERA Program**

- For participants, the staff support and VISION’s message about advancement were the key components of the program. The location of VISION also contributed to participants’ more positive view of its services, compared with JOBS.
- VISION was successful in engaging clients during the preemployment period, but once clients found employment, there was considerable drop-off in their participation.
- Staff were comfortable addressing individual concerns and issues related to job retention, but staff on a whole never reached a level of comfort in providing advancement services, especially given the late development of these services in Salem. As a result, VISION did not fully implement the retention and advancement components as outlined in the original program design. (Table 3 compares the proposed VISION model as it was designed and the VISION program as it was implemented.)

### **Preemployment Engagement and Services**

Unemployed TANF applicants in Salem who were assigned to VISION were referred to an intake meeting and orientation at Winema Career Center. During these intake sessions, VISION staff invested much time and energy in marketing the program’s differences from regular welfare-to-work services, stressing the team approach, enhanced customer service, and ongoing services after job placement. Also during intake, the VISION case managers worked with each client to develop an individual Personal Development Plan (PDP), which outlined the client’s short- and long-term career goals. These goals were revisited and updated over the course of the program and after the client became employed.

VISION staff had high levels of contact with clients during the preemployment job search period, partly because most participants were required to meet with staff once a week. Moreover, because VISION offered workshops four days per week, participants often dropped in informally after attending a workshop, and they accessed job search services at the Career Center. Despite the high rate of contact during the preemployment period, however, participants did not necessarily attend the full complement of workshops available. During an early assessment of program operations, MDRC staff found, through case file reviews, that only 54 percent of the participants had attended the introductory workshop and that less than half (48 percent) had attended the workshop entitled “Career Navigation” — and these are only two workshops out of approximately ten that were available. When clients did come in for a meeting with VISION staff, their case managers reviewed their participation and checked on their progress. The training and employment specialists conducted individual employability assessments and

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Table 3**

**Comparison of the Proposed VISION Model and the VISION Program as Implemented**

Feature	VISION Model (as Designed)	VISION Program (as Implemented)
Goals	Job placement; job retention and career advancement	More focus on retention-related issues than advancement; difficult for staff, particularly case managers, to adjust to the concept of advancement services
Staff roles	Overlapping responsibilities between DHS case managers and Chemeketa Community College training and employment specialists Same staff for both pre- and postemployment services	Specialized staff roles as program evolved; by end of operations, a designated advancement team (one case manager and one training and employment specialist)
Employer involvement	Establish partnerships with State of Oregon and private employers for purposes of job development and retention and advancement	Limited contact with employers in general; received job leads and employer information from Business Specialists at Winema Career Center
Education and training services	Involve education and training providers in VISION; work with clients to explore options; offer any available incentives (such as day-planners, donated computers)	Little direct involvement of education and training providers; opportunities and payment/financial aid options explored by staff with clients; co-enrollment in WIA for training when appropriate
<b><u>Preemployment phase</u></b> (includes a DHS assessment period that could last up to 45 days) <sup>a</sup>		
Customer contact	2-3 times per week	2-3 times per week plus informal drop-ins
Job search and career-planning services	One-on-one meetings and VISION-specific workshops; focus on skills, career interests and goals, and future job retention; direct link to and assistance with services at Winema Career Center Business Specialists and WIA-funded VISION staff together identify jobs with career tracks	Strong rapport between staff and clients; most staff time spent on addressing employment barriers and eligibility issues relating to public benefits Emphasis on customer service to ensure that clients received the supportive services for which they were eligible Meetings and workshops successful in conveying VISION's "dream job" message but less successful in helping clients achieve the related long-term goals

(continued)



**Table 3 (continued)**

Feature	VISION Model (as Designed)	VISION Program (as Implemented)
<b><u>Postemployment phase</u></b>		
Client contact	Meet with all clients within 1 week of a new job; weekly contact for first 30 days; biweekly contact for 30 to 90 days	Irregular contact with clients; diligent but unsuccessful efforts to engage and maintain clients' participation in the program after they became employed
Job retention, education, and advancement services	Continued case management services and access to resources at Winema Career Center to ensure that clients worked toward the advancement goals they established during the preemployment phase	During most of VISION's operations, struggles to follow up working clients for retention and advancement purposes; toward the end of the program, added "Career Night" and advancement meetings
	Contact client's employer within 30 days of new job to get employer's support for client's advancement goals	Minimal contact with clients' employers

NOTE: <sup>a</sup>This was mandatory and included job search, except for those who were exempt (for example, clients with medical conditions or late-term pregnancies).

provided job leads, strategies, and encouragement, speaking with clients about developments in their job search.

During the initial job search phase, the main differences between the JOBS program and the VISION program were the workshops that VISION created, the location of VISION services, the frequency of interaction between VISION clients and staff, and — the most significant difference for clients — the VISION staff's support and their message about career advancement.

First, in contrast to the job search workshops in the JOBS program, VISION created a series of workshops that focused on job retention and career paths. Workshop titles included “Take This Job and Love It,” “Personal Styles at Work,” “Job Retention Strategies,” “Decision-Making,” and “Career Navigation.” Yet, although VISION had a high level of preemployment contact with clients in general, staff reported that they had a difficult time motivating clients to attend all the workshops available. Furthermore, even though the workshops were fairly interactive, they served as isolated sessions rather than as reinforcing modules. Initially, staff did not follow up on the workshop discussions or offer specific guidance or strategies for achieving the goals that clients identified. To address this problem, staff added a follow-up item to the workshop evaluations that participants prepared. The evaluation items — such as “List one thing from this workshop you will use in your family life” — were designed to encourage clients to think about how they would apply the workshops' retention and advancement information to their daily life at work and at home.

Second, VISION's location at Winema Career Center provided a strong and direct link to the center's services. Universal services were available to everyone and consisted of the use of the Winema resource room, where anyone could access technology and tools (for example, computers, labor market information, faxes, and phones) to conduct a self-directed job search. Individuals who needed more help and were eligible for WIA could receive more intensive case management assistance in conducting their job search. Intensive services included one-on-one assistance in preparing résumés, participating in mock interviews, and obtaining job leads. Dollars for vocational training, offered through either eligible training providers or the community college, were also available through WIA, including on-the-job training. The physical location of the VISION program, which was housed at the Career Center, and VISION staff's familiarity with WIA resources and program eligibility rules, gave VISION participants greater access to WIA services than JOBS participants, who may not have known how to access these resources.

## Box 1

### Case Review: Enhanced Program Referrals

A single parent of three entered VISION as a dislocated worker. Using OLMIS (see the text) at the Career Center, the training and employment specialist helped the client explore opportunities in the medical field, the client's "field of fascination." Together, they decided that the client needed additional training.

The training and employment specialist helped the client find a Medical Assistant program and convinced the school to waive three months of the nine-month program if the client passed the appropriate tests, which she did. Then, the specialist coordinated the client's school and living expenses — a combination of WIA and VISION funds helped with tuition; VISION helped with car insurance; and DHS supplemented unemployment insurance with a partial cash grant, child care, and transportation. The training and employment specialist helped her apply for Training Unemployment Insurance (TUI). As a result, the client was financially able to go to school, completed her training in six months, and was hired as a full-time Medical Assistant.

Finally, for participants (and for many staff), the most distinguishing component of the VISION program lay in the staff — their enhanced customer service and their message about career retention and advancement. VISION staff were clearly successful in establishing strong rapport with clients, which encouraged them to disclose concerns that could later become barriers to job retention. (See Box 2.)

Furthermore, VISION staff made sure that clients were aware of and knew how to use the resources at Winema Career Center, and colocation enabled staff to make more enhanced referrals, including to WIA programs and funds.<sup>4</sup> Staff helped clients use the job search and skills assessment programs in the computer room and to navigate the database of job openings maintained by the Oregon Employment Department. The state also created the very sophisticated Oregon Labor Market Information System (OLMIS), and VISION staff routinely helped participants use it to conduct research on occupations, industries, and other labor market information. (See Box 1.) VISION clients participated in Winema's group job search workshops and often took part in the Career Center's "Meet the Employer" sessions as well as presentations and "live résumés" offered at Winema.<sup>5</sup> Since VISION did not have its own Busi-

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<sup>4</sup>Since one VISION training and employment specialist was funded partly by WIA and was trained to do WIA co-enrollment, the program was better able to leverage WIA funds for VISION participants. (The training and employment specialists were required to enroll at least one WIA client a month, which resulted in many co-enrollments.)

<sup>5</sup>At "Meet the Employer" sessions at the Career Center, employers presented job openings to participants, who then presented their résumés to the employers.

## Box 2

### **Focus Group: Customer Service and Support**

More than anything else, participants in both the focus groups appreciated the “one-on-one” support that they received from VISION staff. Many cited examples in which the staff were sympathetic to their individual situations and supported them through difficult times; a few reported that a VISION staff member was the only person in their lives who was really supporting them. As one participant stated: “She was my backbone when I went to school. She was my only support.”

The focus group consisting of welfare recidivists was particularly enthusiastic. For example, their phone calls were returned promptly, which was not the experience they had had in the regular welfare-to-work program (JOBS). Participants expressed that staff took the time to get to know their individual situations: “She got to know me.”

ness Specialists, the training and employment staff worked closely with Winema’s Business Specialists. Moreover, since VISION clients used the resources of the Career Center for their job search and also attended workshops during the week, they were more likely to have both formal and informal contact with VISION staff than control group members had with JOBS staff. In fact, one issue that VISION case managers frequently brought up was that drop-in clients often impeded them from getting their work done, since they couldn’t anticipate when someone would drop by the office for assistance.

Throughout interactions with their unemployed clients, VISION staff strove to incorporate messages about job retention and advancement. Unlike the JOBS program staff, the VISION staff encouraged clients to identify and work toward a job of interest, or a “field of fascination.” Participants reported that staff recognized that getting a job was not an end in itself: “[VISION] never was described as just getting a job and that’s it. The main difference [from JOBS] is the message.” During focus groups, participants stated that VISION focused on “what you want, what you are good at, and what you would be happy doing.” One participant stated that, despite the tough job market, VISION did not help her look for just any job but “geared” her toward a job that she would enjoy and retain, and in which she might advance.

The training and employment specialists tried to target jobs that had benefits or paid more. They spent a lot of time coaching clients to look for jobs and advancement opportunities in their field of fascination. While staff used some assessment tools, career exploration and development were mostly a function of particular training and employment specialists and their knowledge and interpersonal skills. In general, the specialists did not have a uniform set of strategies or tools that they used with participants to identify career goals or to address future advancement.

Thus, training and employment specialists often served more as a “listening ear” and a source of encouragement than as a career counselor. Several participants spoke of how VISION staff guided them as they looked at different job possibilities and supported them through their decision-making processes: “I’d ask things like, ‘Should I do this. . . ?’ [Staff] wouldn’t tell me what to do, but they would help me.” (See Box 3.)

### Box 3

#### **Focus Group Narrative: Supportive Career Counseling**

A VISION participant wanted to find a job doing stagehand work. His training and employment specialist helped him set up some informational interviews, from which the client realized that the industry did not pay very well. As a result, the client began to consider jobs in the construction industry.

While the VISION staff did not steer him toward this new field, the participant described his training and employment specialist as a “second or third brain.” Once the client began receiving job offers, the specialist helped him think through the benefits plans, wages, and job stability of the different offers. The client stated that without VISION, he would have had no such resource.

Nonetheless, staff reported that too much of the time that they spent with nonworking clients went into addressing and resolving employment barriers, such as child care, housing, or transportation concerns. While this was an essential component of VISION services — and inevitable when working with an unemployed population — staff reported feeling consumed by such issues. They described themselves as “crisis managers,” particularly since clients often dropped in unannounced with eligibility questions or other personal crises. Also, staff were more experienced and more comfortable addressing retention-related issues than advancement concerns, which may have contributed to their focus on barrier resolution rather than career development and advancement.

For clients who were in danger of not finding employment, VISION had a systematic staffing process called “insight”: Right before the end of the job search phase, the unemployed client and the entire VISION team met to discuss the various options available to the client. Unlike JOBS, VISION had some flexibility to extend job search beyond the 45-day period if the client had promising prospects. Otherwise, the client usually entered a work-attached activity, which was the route typically taken by JOBS clients who were unemployed at the end of the assessment period. Work-attached programs offer unpaid volunteer positions in the community or a sheltered work environment, primarily with public or private nonprofit agencies. The pur-

pose is for the client to learn on-the-job skills and to gain experience that could help build the client's résumé; such placements sometimes do turn into permanent employment.

Clients who failed to participate in whatever was decided during the VISION team's insight process would go through a disqualification meeting, during which the team and any relevant partner agencies met with the client to discuss the reasons for nonparticipation. The outcome of these meetings sometimes depended on the staff who were involved in the decision-making process. For example, MDRC observed two disqualification meetings with nonparticipants. One was a very open discussion that included the client in a dialogue about her reasons for not participating. The meeting ended with the staff's having learned about some of the client's career interests and frustrations with her work experience program, which allowed the team to offer relevant referrals (one for a learning disability test and one for a driver's-permit test). The other disqualification meeting was focused more on program compliance than on future job opportunities; the client agreed that before she could restart her work experience classes, she had to submit a doctor's note to explain her previous absences.

Ultimately, VISION operated under the same welfare-to-work regulations as JOBS, and, thus, there was only so much that VISION staff could do to help participants target a better job or a job in their field of interest. If too much of the 45-day job search period had passed without finding employment, staff pushed the client to take a "survival job" and then to advance from there. Consequently, vocational training and work attachment programs during the initial job search phase were limited and were encouraged only if employment seemed unlikely at the end of the job search period.

### **Postemployment Engagement and Services**

The strengths of VISION's preemployment services — the program's message about career advancement and the staff's enhanced customer service — were intended to carry over to help ensure that clients who found employment would stay engaged in the program and participate in its postemployment services. VISION had planned to follow up with a newly working client within a week of employment, in order to revisit the client's career goals and Personal Development Plan. The client's same training and employment specialist was to schedule an appointment — preferably, a lunch to celebrate the new job — and to begin addressing any potential barriers to job retention. In subsequent meetings, the specialist would direct the client to relevant education or training or to jobs that paid more, had better benefits, or were in the client's field of interest.

In reality, however, once a client found employment, there was considerable drop-off in program participation. VISION had little success with postemployment follow-up, and so there was little emphasis on career advancement. This reflected a combination of clients' availability

and follow through — given the voluntary nature of the postemployment services — and staff’s heavy workloads and reported lack of comfort in delivering advancement services. As a result, VISION was not able to fully test many components of its original design, particularly its post-employment aspects. (See Table 3.)

Although Oregon disregarded 50 percent of a TANF recipient’s earned income in calculating benefits, its high minimum wage meant that those who found employment were generally ineligible for cash assistance.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, clients were no longer required to participate in VISION for purposes of fulfilling eligibility requirements, which weakened their link to the program. Furthermore, as caseloads increased, staff simply did not have the time needed to reach out also to working clients. Unemployed clients and preemployment services occupied most of their time, and staff realized that rapport can go only so far toward maintaining clients’ postemployment engagement.

For most of the program’s operating period, staff expressed that they did not have sufficient time, resources, or skills to develop and implement the postemployment services that would make VISION distinctive from JOBS. In fact, the program did not focus on this component until near the completion of its operations — when random assignment and preemployment services ended and no longer consumed staff time. At that point, program managers were able to transition those unemployed clients who had received services for more than a year and had not obtained employment to a JOBS case manager. They designated a training and employment specialist and a case manager as the career advancement team, which spearheaded efforts to develop VISION’s much-neglected postemployment services. The team received a caseload of approximately 250 employed clients and met weekly to brainstorm about potential services, strategies to engage clients, and ways to involve employers.<sup>7</sup> In hindsight, most of the staff felt that VISION would have operated more efficiently had roles been specialized earlier. Additionally, the management staff expressed the opinion that the program could have paid more attention to postemployment services if more staff had been designated for the project.

### Job Retention and Follow-Up Services

Throughout VISION’s operations, staff tried a variety of telephone methods to follow up employed clients. Initially, once a client seemed stably employed, the case manager called and attempted to “plant a seed” about advancement and also tried to schedule an appointment with a training and employment specialist. For a period of time, VISION used a “bucket sys-

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<sup>6</sup>Oregon’s minimum wage ranged from \$6.50 to \$6.90 per hour through most of VISION’s operations. Beginning in 2004, the state’s minimum wage increased to \$7.50 per hour, with annual adjustments for inflation that raised it to \$7.80 per hour in 2007.

<sup>7</sup>The list of newly employed clients was not updated often, and so many who were on it had become unemployed by the time VISION contacted them.

tem,” whereby a staff person was responsible for calling every newly employed client in the first 12 weeks of employment.

While this approach seemed to work well, the staff position turned over several times, leaving periods when follow-up calls were not made. Eventually — because of budgetary reasons and after management determined that the level of effort was not an effective use of staff resources, given the difficulty of reaching clients and the limited calls received from clients in return — the bucket system was abandoned. Later, in an effort to minimize “phone tag” and voice-mail messages, the VISION advancement team used items from a 12-week follow-up questionnaire as well as the Self-Sufficiency Scale (both developed earlier in the program) to guide telephone conversations with newly employed clients. The purpose was to help staff conduct timely follow-up and immediately assess needs when they reached an employed client on the phone.

Based on field observations and interviews, staff were more comfortable and more skilled in addressing retention-related issues than advancement; and although it was challenging to implement both pre- and postemployment services, having the same staff members provide both was helpful during contacts with employed clients. In many cases, knowing a participant’s personal situation is what enabled staff to provide more tailored assistance than JOBS could offer. (See Box 4.)

As one client stated: “They get to know your needs to keep a job and retain a job.” For example, focus group participants expressed that they had received many useful referrals. One participant was referred to and attended an anger management class. Another attended a workshop entitled “Silent Journeys” that focused on building self-esteem: “I had low self-esteem when I got here, and they told me to take time for me. I never took time for me.” While these kinds of services were also available to JOBS participants, VISION staff’s familiarity with their clients helped them make more individualized referrals.

#### **Box 4**

##### **Case Review: Addressing Potential Barriers**

One VISION participant received a job promotion but feared that her employer would look into her past and discover a criminal record. Extremely worried, she met with her training and employment specialist to discuss ways to deal with the problem, should it arise. The specialist encouraged her to “come clean” with her employer rather than letting him find out about her past from another source. She followed the specialist’s advice about that and also about how to discuss her situation with her employer. The employer reacted well to the information, and the participant kept her job and also received the promotion.



Staff also spoke a lot about the frustrations of motivating clients to participate after they had become employed. Staff questioned whether it even made sense to spend so much time conducting outreach and marketing postemployment services: “Clients do not want to be bothered or called . . . if clients aren’t interested, then you can’t make them [participate].”

### Advancement Services

Like staff in many other ERA programs, most of the VISION staff’s experience was in delivering preemployment services. VISION had expected staff to provide the career coaching and labor market expertise that the program needed for its advancement service component, based on the training they received in the Career Development Facilitator course. However, staff reported that while they felt knowledgeable about dealing with retention issues, they struggled to understand what advancement “should look like” — how to develop advancement services in general, the strategies and methods involved, and how to approach employers and clients regarding advancement.

Career advancement was a new philosophy to apply in services for the welfare population. There were no precedents on which to build, and it was unclear what the end product would look like. This contributed to the ongoing challenge of staff buy-in. It was difficult for some staff to commit to services that were undefined and relatively unfamiliar, and, given that, one staff person stated that some colleagues “just [did not] want the extra work.” Staff reported that they felt as though they were working in a vacuum, and many expressed wishes for more training and management support.

Such feelings were exacerbated by the program’s late shift to advancement. By the time advancement came into focus, morale was low, and staff had begun to think about their own next steps. One case manager stated that rather than “putting full steam into the project . . . [I am] putting full steam into leaving.” Another stated: “Had I started [VISION] from the get-go, I would have had more time to understand and contribute to advancement.”

Even toward the end of VISION’s operations, the advancement team still had many questions about how to help employed clients, repeatedly stating that advancement was just not their “area of expertise.” They felt that much of the advancement-related training was lost on them because it had occurred too early in the program, at a time when most of the caseload consisted of unemployed clients with preemployment concerns. Furthermore, management struggled to get staff to use the resources available to them, including the advancement tools and strategies from their trainings. Consequently, VISION had few services to offer working clients, and the program struggled to engage them.

In the end, the advancement services that VISION implemented for employed clients consisted of individual meetings with a designated advancement training and employment spe-

cialist, case management services, “Career Night,” and access to Winema Career Center. The advancement specialist, who was responsible only for employed clients, conducted meetings systematically and began each one by discussing any potential barriers to job retention and, therefore, to advancement. Child care, housing, and transportation were common topics. The specialist worked hard to accommodate clients’ schedules and locations, making an effort to meet them during their lunch hour — often buying them lunch — and at their job sites.

The relationships that the advancement specialist had built while offering preemployment services laid a foundation to address on-the-job retention issues and to explore potential routes to advancement. The topics discussed with clients demonstrated the specialist’s familiarity with each person’s situation. In one meeting, for example, the specialist followed up on a client’s challenges in getting herself to work and her children to school on time. Writing down some specific suggestions for the client on how to better manage the morning rush (such as packing lunches and setting out clothes the night before), the specialist then told the client that the two of them would follow up and discuss whether these tips had helped.

The advancement specialist used case notes extensively to follow up on specific tasks that clients were supposed to complete — such as submitting an application for public housing or contacting potential training programs. The specialist also often referred to the “Passport to Success” brochure, a packet of materials and worksheets that addressed retention issues, such as time management. When completed, the packet could be redeemed for a \$10 gift voucher. In the meetings observed, however, none of the clients had brought the Passport, nor did they seem to know its purpose. At the end of each meeting, the client left with a list of new tasks and deadlines, and the advancement specialist kept a copy of the list. From field observations, this strategy seemed very effective, as it gave the client a clear, manageable list of goals that the advancement specialist could easily follow up. Otherwise, few tools were used to facilitate the discussions about advancement. (See Box 5.)

Held the third Wednesday of each month, Career Night was a forum in which clients who were employed convened to discuss issues that could affect retention and advancement. This service was implemented in June 2004, two years after random assignment started and one year before service delivery ended. As incentives to attend, VISION offered free pizza, a raffle, and a \$10 gas voucher. To make sure that the event was relevant to clients, staff used a worksheet entitled “Opportunity Knocks” to identify clients’ needs and interests, and they then worked with clients accordingly. Common issues that were addressed included résumé updates, time management, budget and finances, job referrals, General Educational Development (GED) classes and vocational training, and researching other jobs or careers.

## Box 5

### **Case Review: Services Both Before and After Employment**

A client with a strong work history and a college degree had been searching for a job unsuccessfully for six months before entry into VISION. The training and employment specialist began by rebuilding the client's confidence. During their weekly meetings, the specialist helped the client complete the PD-100 (Oregon's state employment application), use various job search Web sites, and review job openings according to the client's skills and strengths: "[The client] had been so down, and through the constant support I gave [her], along with expanding the work experience on her applications, [the client] got back her sense of self-worth."

The training and employment specialist conducted practice interviews with the client until she felt confident about her interviewing skills. She began receiving qualifying scores on the PD-100 as well as calls for job interviews. These efforts were rewarded when the client was hired as an executive assistant for a temporary employment agency. Once hired, the client continued to work with the specialist to identify routes for advancement. The specialist suggested that the client create an employee handbook to demonstrate her motivation to add to her skill set and to pursue training that would help her get a promotion — and to let her boss know about her interest in advancing.

To recruit participants for Career Night, fliers were sent to a list of employed clients. The take-up rate for these evenings was low, however, ranging from 5 to 11 participants. When there was time, the advancement team made reminder phone calls to employed clients, which was a more effective recruitment method and resulted in the highest turnout (11 participants). Staff reported that the few who did attend Career Night benefited, because many became reengaged in the VISION program and scheduled follow-up meetings to discuss their advancement goals. (See Box 6.)

### **Education and Training**

Education was not a strong focus of the VISION program, especially compared with programs in the other ERA sites. Ultimately, the work-first philosophy of Oregon's welfare program may have led to a lack of emphasis on education and training as an option for advancement. When VISION staff did discuss education with a client, they were likely to encourage vocational training programs, such as for medical assistant or computer technician.

That the Career Center was operated by Chemeketa Community College did help clients view education as a viable goal. In addition, VISION training and employment specialists made a greater effort than JOBS staff to leverage and coordinate VISION and WIA funds for training purposes. For example, one focus group participant said that, without VISION, she

## Box 6

### Observation: Career Night

Career Night reconnected clients with VISION, motivating them to schedule a meeting with their advancement training and employment specialist. The Opportunity Knocks worksheet that one client had completed at Career Night identified her goal of becoming a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). The worksheet served as a reference for the advancement specialist when the client returned for her scheduled follow-up meeting. During the meeting, the specialist called a medical center that provided free CNA training for employees and asked about the date that the training started, the course requirements, and the cost of the training if the participant was not able to be hired. After the meeting, the advancement specialist helped the client complete the on-line application for an open position at the medical center.

would not be getting a GED certificate, inasmuch as the program had paid for two terms of study. Welfare recidivists who had had prior experience with JOBS were even more emphatic about VISION's support for education. One stated that VISION had fought for her to go back to school, which was unlike any other welfare program that she knew.

### On-the-Job Advancement

VISION staff encouraged on-the-job advancement as a more promising option than education or training. A common strategy that the advancement specialist suggested to clients was to stay aware of job openings, locate the job descriptions, and communicate an interest in those positions to supervisors. It was the clients' responsibility to take action and to complete the tasks that the advancement specialist suggested, and then the specialist worked with the clients to update their résumés and job applications. In general, the advancement specialist served less as an advocate and more as a support to clients, recognizing their accomplishments and encouraging them to take the initiative to acquire more responsibility on the job or any necessary training. Rarely did the advancement specialist have contact with employers for such purposes, since clients were generally unwilling to sign a release form allowing for staff-employer contact. (See Box 7.)

As mentioned in the Introduction to this report, VISION had intended to work closely with employers — particularly with the State of Oregon — in order to facilitate clients' on-the-job advancement. In part because of the state's hiring freeze, this goal never materialized, and the program had little direct contact with employers. While staff agreed that retention and advancement efforts would have benefited from closer links with employers, they reported that they were unsure of how to approach employers. In addition, staff felt that most clients did not want them to be involved in their work relationships and did not understand why it would be helpful.

**Box 7**

**Observation: An Advancement Meeting**

A VISION client whose ultimate goal was to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) had been working as a volunteer Nurse's Aide through the Work Experience Program. With the encouragement of the advancement training and employment specialist, the client communicated to her supervisor her need and desire to work as an employee instead. The supervisor was surprised and pleased to hear of the client's ambition, and she hired her as a temporary employee.

During the advancement meeting, the advancement specialist addressed job retention issues, particularly the client's housing situation and her next career steps — taking CNA courses and applying for a permanent position as a Department Specialist, the most recent job opening. The advancement specialist suggested strategies for the client: networking with staff, updating her résumé, and asking for a recommendation from her trainer. The specialist quickly recognized the client's hesitation to ask for a reference and reassured her, letting the client know that it would be to her advantage to have such a recommendation. At the end of the discussion, the client was given a list of tasks that she needed to complete before their next meeting.

The advancement team was especially frustrated by their attempts to establish employer relationships and to find out about specific opportunities in companies. Although VISION staff worked with Winema Career Center's Business Specialist, they wished that the program had job developers whose primary responsibility was to develop employer relationships. They kept asking MDRC: "How do we get information on advancement opportunities in a company?" and "How do we approach employers?" and "Why are we calling employers at all?"

**Supportive and Ancillary Services and Public Assistance**

Everyone who participated in VISION or JOBS was eligible to receive child care, transportation, and medical insurance and some access to emergency funds. Only during its first year of implementation did VISION have some extra money for emergency payments, which was usually used to help a client pay for rent, utilities, or car insurance or repair. For example, one focus group participant stated that VISION funds had helped pay to fix her car's radiator.

Given the program's focus on job retention and, most of the time, due to the encouragement of its training and employment specialists, VISION case managers were more likely than JOBS case managers to authorize the use of extra emergency funds. As discussed, the case managers and the training and employment specialists sometimes disagreed on the provision of

funds; case managers were often uncomfortable making the large payments that the specialists asked for to cover a clients' rent or car repairs.

VISION's program design may have helped participants navigate the process of applying for public assistance. As the concluding section of the report discusses, access to the VISION program led to significant increases in public assistance, including health care and food stamps. While VISION and JOBS operated under the same regulations regarding supportive services and public assistance, there were some notable differences in how they linked clients to such supports. In JOBS, the case managers were responsible for both eligibility and supportive service issues. In VISION, because staff worked as a team and because the program emphasized customer service, the training and employment specialists ended up dealing with eligibility issues as well. They often acted as troubleshooters or intermediaries between VISION clients and case managers.

Second, because the VISION staff had more frequent and longer-term contact with clients than the JOBS staff did, the VISION staff made sure that clients were always receiving the supports for which they were eligible.<sup>8</sup> Since VISION continued to work with clients who were employed and who were deemed to be income-ineligible for TANF, the program was able to connect clients immediately to government assistance if they became eligible at any point (for example, if they lost a job).

As a result, the VISION staff on the whole were more available to help clients deal with eligibility issues. Either a training and employment specialist or a case manager could issue date-stamped applications for TANF, food stamps, medical care, and other government benefits. During the focus groups that MDRC conducted in Salem, it was clear that VISION participants were very aware of the drastic cutoff points, or "cliffs," in the welfare systems, and clients stated that assistance from staff helped to mitigate these challenges. For example, VISION's aid was particularly helpful in ensuring continued receipt of the Oregon Health Plan. If there was any break in a family's medical assistance, the adult member risked ineligibility, based on the medical programs available to adults — which happened often, because preparing the paperwork for the Oregon Health Plan was a fairly involved and complicated process.

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<sup>8</sup>For clients who found employment during the assessment period, VISION staff were more likely than JOBS staff to open TANF grants and then to close them on the basis of having found employment. According to Oregon's food stamp policy at the time, clients received five additional months of benefits that did not take into account their wages from the new job. In JOBS, an individual's TANF grant was not usually opened during the assessment period. Therefore, a JOBS participant who found employment during the initial 45 days would not likely receive the additional months of food stamps or any TANF assistance.

## How Did VISION and JOBS Staff Spend Their Time?

- Most of the VISION staff's client-contact time was spent with nonworking clients.
- The topics most often discussed with clients centered on government assistance and eligibility issues. Compared with JOBS, VISION showed an increase in discussions of supportive services.

MDRC administered a "time study" in all the ERA sites to better understand the practices of program staff. The study captured detailed information on the nature of ERA staff-client interactions and on the topics covered during these interactions. The time study also collected information on how VISION and JOBS case managers typically spent their time each day. In Salem, the time study was conducted from November 3 to 17, 2003. All VISION staff who carried a caseload participated in the study, along with the JOBS staff who worked with the JOBS group.

When the time study was administered, VISION staff had an average caseload of 75 clients, which was similar to the average caseload of JOBS staff and slightly smaller than the average caseload of staff in the other ERA sites. Caseloads for the VISION case managers were quite a bit higher than caseloads for the training and employment specialists — averaging 110 clients and 40 clients, respectively.

Figure 2 shows that VISION case managers spent about 36 percent of all work time in contact with clients, which is a slightly greater proportion of time than in other ERA sites. Of that time in client contact, most of it — 30 percent — was spent with nonworking clients; only 5 percent of case managers' time was spent with working clients. While the length of time in contact with each type of client was about the same (27 minutes), staff had a far greater number of contacts with nonworking clients. Of the five client contacts that staff had per day (Table 4), an average of four were with nonworking clients. Since VISION was designed to begin providing services before participants were employed, it makes sense that more contacts were made with nonworking clients. The difference in the number of contacts with working and with nonworking clients also speaks to the difficulty of maintaining contact with clients once they became employed.

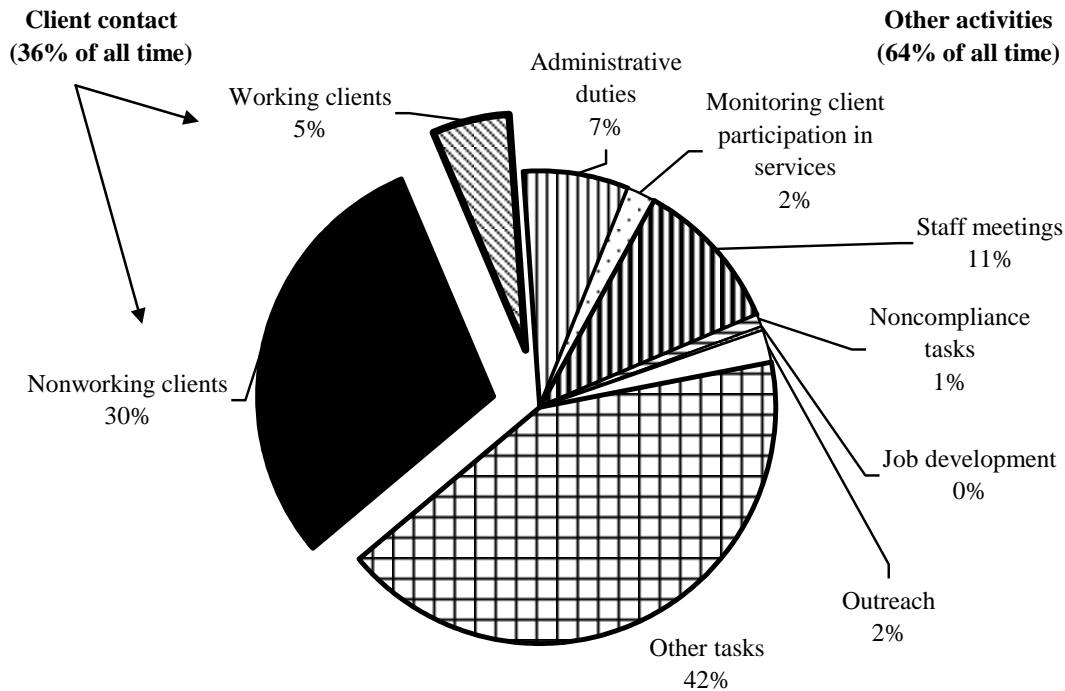
As shown in Table 5, about 44 percent of the contacts were in person — mostly in the program office — and nearly all the rest of the contacts were made by telephone. Clients initiated contacts about 67 percent of the time, which is not surprising, given that most clients were required to contact VISION staff to demonstrate that they were participating in preemployment activities.

The Employment Retention and Advancement Project

Figure 2

Summary of How VISION Staff  
Typically Spent Their Time

Salem, Oregon



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the ERA time study.

Table 6 compares the topics that were covered during contacts with working clients and with nonworking clients. A third of all client contacts — with both working and nonworking clients — included some discussion of enrollment in government assistance and ongoing eligibility issues. As expected, issues about government assistance were addressed more often in contacts with nonworking clients (36 percent), but a considerable proportion of contacts with working clients (24 percent) also included such discussions.

The next most commonly discussed topics involved supportive service issues, such as child care and transportation, and these were addressed more with working clients (41 percent) than with nonworking clients (18 percent). Finally, topics related to retention and advancement were more likely to be addressed with working clients. Not surprisingly, topics related to career goals and advancement were more likely to be addressed with working clients (24 percent) than with nonworking clients (15 percent). Personal or family and on-the-job issues — topics that can affect retention



**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Table 4**  
**Extent of Contact Between VISION Staff and Clients**  
**Salem, Oregon**

All Case Managers	
Percentage of work time spent in contact with:	
Any client	35.7
Working clients	5.4
Nonworking clients	30.3
Work experience clients	NA
Average number of client contacts per day per staff member	
Any client	5.0
Working clients	0.8
Nonworking clients	4.2
Work experience clients	NA
Average number of minutes per day per contact with:	
Any client	27.1
Working clients	25.8
Nonworking clients	27.4
Work experience clients	NA
Number of VISION staff time-studied	9

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the ERA time study.

NOTE: NA = not applicable.

— together constituted 29 percent of all client contacts, suggesting that job stability, especially for working clients, was a dominate topic that VISION staff worked to address with VISION participants. Discussions with nonworking clients about on-the-job issues occurred in only 3 percent of all contacts, which supports the finding that staff had little contact with clients after they were working.

Table 7 shows the extent to which the topics covered in staff-client contacts differed between VISION and JOBS. As shown, the staff of both programs spent a similar proportion of time on initial client engagement. However, compared with VISION, the JOBS staff addressed sanctioning and participation issues in a greater percentage of client contacts. This difference may reflect the work-first message of JOBS as well as VISION’s strength-based approach to case management and the strong rapport that its staff attempted to build with clients. VISION also showed an increase in discussions regarding supportive services and a small increase in exploring education and training options. Such discussions may have contributed to the higher

## The Employment Retention and Advancement Project

Table 5

### Description of Contact Between VISION Staff and Clients Salem, Oregon

		All Case Managers
Percentage of all contacts that were:		
In person		44.4
Office visit		41.9
Home visit		2.4
Employer visit		0.0
Visit elsewhere		0.0
Not in person		55.6
Phone contact		53.4
Written contact		1.0
Other type of contact		1.2
Percentage of all clients contacts that were initiated by:		
Staff person		32.6
Client		67.4
Other person		0.0
Number of VISION staff time-studied		9

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the ERA time study.

level of engagement in VISION’s employment-related activities. (This is discussed in the next major section, “Participation in the ERA Program in Salem.”)

### VISION Compared with JOBS

- Compared with JOBS, the primary differences of VISION were its long-term message about advancement, its customer service, and the location of its services.

As detailed in this section, there was not a stark programmatic contrast between the two programs, and the operating environment may have further diluted the differences that VISION was able to introduce. As noted in the Introduction to this report, Winema Career Center and its partners had an exceptionally strong service network and history of collaboration. The Salem Department of Human Services (DHS) and Chemeketa Community College had previously

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Table 6**

**Comparison of Topics Covered by VISION Staff  
with Working Clients and with Nonworking Clients**

**Salem, Oregon**

	Working Clients	Non- Working Clients	All Clients
Percentage of all client contacts that included at least some discussion of: <sup>a</sup>			
Initial client engagement <sup>b</sup>	1.3	10.4	5.7
Supportive service eligibility and issues	41.1	18.3	26.3
General check-in	9.3	12.5	12.6
Screening/assessment	2.1	5.7	4.4
Address on-the-job issues/problems	18.7	2.8	11.0
Address personal or family issues	21.3	17.2	18.0
Explore specific employment and training options	5.8	10.2	8.4
Discuss career goals and advancement	23.6	14.6	17.7
Assist with reemployment	6.4	20.1	12.9
Discuss issues related to financial incentives or stipends	NA	NA	NA
Schedule/refer for work experience position	NA	NA	NA
Enrollment in government assistance and ongoing eligibility issues	23.5	35.6	33.0
Assistance with the EITC	2.6	2.3	2.6
Participation/sanctioning issues	20.3	12.6	21.6
Schedule/refer for screening/assessment	0.0	0.8	1.0
Schedule/refer for job search or other employment services	4.5	6.1	6.9
Schedule/refer for education or training	2.2	1.6	1.8
Schedule/refer for services to address special or personal issues	6.3	7.7	7.7
Provide job leads or referrals	NA	NA	NA
Number of VISION staff time-studied			9

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from ERA time study.

NOTES: NA = not applicable.

<sup>a</sup>These percentages add up to more than 100 percent because more than one activity category or topic could be recorded for each client contact.

<sup>b</sup>Each client contact may cover one or more topic activities but is counted only once per activity category.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Table 7**

**Comparison of Topics Covered by VISION Staff and by JOBS Staff  
Salem, Oregon**

	VISION Group	JOBS Group
Percentage of all client contacts that included at least some discussion of: <sup>a</sup>		
Initial client engagement <sup>b</sup>	5.7	4.8
Supportive service eligibility and issues	26.3	14.4
General check-in	12.6	13.4
Screening/assessment	4.4	5.5
Address on-the-job issues/problems	11.0	1.5
Address personal or family issues	18.0	21.2
Explore specific employment and training options	8.4	4.3
Discuss career goals and advancement	17.7	15.3
Assist with reemployment	12.9	26.5
Discuss issues related to financial incentives or stipends	NA	NA
Schedule/refer for work experience position	NA	NA
Enrollment in government assistance and ongoing eligibility issues	33.0	19.6
Assistance with the EITC	2.6	0.0
Participation/sanctioning issues	21.6	33.4
Schedule/refer for screening/assessment	1.0	0.0
Schedule/refer for job search or other employment services	6.9	2.8
Schedule/refer for education or training	1.8	0.9
Schedule/refer for services to address special or personal issues	7.7	8.5
<b>Number of staff time-studied</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the ERA time study.

NOTES: NA = not applicable.

<sup>a</sup>These percentages add up to more than 100 percent because more than one activity category or topic could be recorded for each client contact.

<sup>b</sup>Each client contact may cover one or more topic activities but is counted only once per activity category.

worked together on various workforce retention and advancement efforts. For example, in a joint DHS-Chemeketa project that was implemented before VISION, a retention specialist provided access to and information about job support services and skills training at the sites of clients' employers.

Since the training and employment specialists in VISION and the employment consultants in JOBS were all employed by Chemeketa Community College, their approaches to clients and their philosophy about their jobs may have been more similar than not. In fact, interviews with and observations of the JOS employment consultants showed that they had equally strong relationships with clients and that they addressed retention and advancement issues as much as they were able. Some tried to steer away from the traditional work-first message and had discussions with clients about longer-term goals. Two JOBS employment consultants said that they often encouraged clients to target jobs with higher pay or advancement opportunities. One employment consultant, in particular, strove to match clients' experiences with job opportunities.

As such, since VISION's postemployment component was not fully implemented, its major differences with JOBS were its intention to work with clients after employment and its underlying philosophy about advancement. JOBS had no built-in postemployment mechanisms or resources to promote retention or to follow up clients' next steps. Once JOBS clients were working and off TANF, they were no longer part of the caseload and, thus, were not in the program. If they requested help on career- or advancement-related issues, JOBS staff usually referred them to Winema Career Center to use its technological resources and to be considered for WIA enrollment, which few clients reportedly did. VISION participants had an inherently stronger and more immediate connection to the center's resources.

In contrast, VISION was created to work with employed clients and to promote retention and advancement. This fundamental difference in program design and message was evident in the two programs' orientations, job search workshops, and client meetings. In addition, while JOBS staff were also colocated, their site was the DHS branch office, a presumably more stigmatizing and more bureaucratic environment than VISION's location at Winema Career Center. (See Box 8.)

During "POWER" (the orientation workshop for the JOBS program), the JOBS employment consultant touched on the benefit of finding a job that would interest participants or that would have a career path, but, in general, the orientation focused on giving clients tools for how to look for a job — any job, rather than a job that could lead to better opportunities. Also, whereas the POWER orientation did not share information on how clients could gain access to

**Box 8**

**Case Review: Client Meetings in JOBS and in VISION**

In a meeting with an unemployed client, a JOBS employment consultant spent most of the time assessing the participant's education, work experience, and other skills, to determine potential job options. They had a strong rapport, and the employment consultant asked a variety of questions regarding the client's long-term goals and interests. The client had finished Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) training and wanted to take a certification test in order to work and advance in the medical field. The JOBS employment consultant encouraged the client to secure CNA certification. However, it was not part of the JOBS program to make sure that the client followed through.

In comparison, during a meeting between a VISION client and her training and employment specialist, the client expressed the goal of becoming a CNA. The specialist located a medical center that provided CNA training and, during the meeting, called the center to inquire about requirements, fees, and whether the training would be free if the participant were later hired. The specialist then took the client to the resource center to make sure that she completed the on-line job application and took advantage of the possibility of free CNA training.

additional job search and career resources, the VISION orientation elaborated on the various resources and services at Winema Career Center.<sup>9</sup>

JOBS workshops focused on basic job search and preparation skills, and, overall, the “work-first” bottom line was clearly communicated. While JOBS staff could, and sometimes did, encourage clients to aim for better pursuits, the program model simply did not allow staff to facilitate or to provide additional assistance. As a JOBS employment consultant stated, “I try to stretch [the JOBS philosophy] to help them get something they're interested in, . . . [but there's] not too much flexibility.” JOBS usually had no postemployment contact with clients.

Although VISION's staffing design was challenging to implement, the team's support and its focus on customer services were clearly appreciated by clients. In contrast, JOBS staff had distinct divisions of responsibility that were described to clients during the POWER orientation. JOBS employment consultants made it clear that the case managers had the final say and oversight regarding clients' supportive services, benefits, and participation. For example, the interactions between JOBS employment consultants and the case managers were highly structured. If a client requested help from an employment consultant regarding an eligibility issue,

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<sup>9</sup>Once random assignment ended, VISION referred unemployed clients who had received services for at least one year (mostly those who had lost their jobs) back to their local DHS office.

the consultant usually left a note to speak with the case manager about fixing the problem. Although employment consultants did try to negotiate with case managers for extra ancillary services, they ultimately deferred to the case managers' authority.





## Participation in the ERA Program in Salem

This section discusses the estimated impacts, or “effects,” on program participation that were achieved by VISION (Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now) — the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) program in Salem, Oregon — as reported in the ERA 12-Month Survey of clients. As measured by the survey, participation includes (1) contacts with staff from VISION or with staff from JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training), Oregon’s regular welfare-to-work program; (2) participation in job search activities; and (3) assistance with job retention and career advancement. Box 9 explains the participation measures used in this report, and Box 10 explains how to read the tables in the ERA evaluation.

The impacts are measured as the difference between the average outcomes of VISION group members and the average outcomes of JOBS group members.<sup>1</sup> Because sample members were randomly assigned to the two groups, differences between the groups that are statistically significant can be attributed confidently to the VISION program.<sup>2</sup>

### Effects on Client-Staff Contacts

- **Survey respondents in both the VISION and the JOBS group reported relatively high levels of contact with staff. However, clients in VISION had a greater average number of contacts, including a slightly greater number of in-person meetings.**

The 45-day job search “assessment period” mandated by Oregon before a welfare applicant could open a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant, as well as the strong rapport between staff and clients in both the VISION and the JOBS group, contributed to similarly high levels of contact between clients and staff in both programs. More than three-quarters of the individuals in both the VISION and the JOBS group had at least one contact with staff in the year following random assignment (Table 8).

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<sup>1</sup>The survey response analysis is described in Appendix E. This analysis found that the survey achieved a 72 percent response rate in Salem and that there are no major issues that might affect the impact estimates.

<sup>2</sup>The impacts are estimated using linear regression, which controls for a range of background characteristics. Statistical significance is used to assess the likelihood that an ineffective program would have generated effects of a given size. The impact analysis for ERA utilized two-tailed t-tests to measure statistical significance. In the results of this report, an effect is said to be statistically significant at the 10 percent level if there is less than a 10 percent chance that the estimated impact could have stemmed from a program with no real effect. Statistical significance is also presented at the 5 percent and the 1 percent levels. Unless otherwise noted, all impacts — or “increases” or “decreases” — are statistically significant. (See Box 10.)

## Box 9

### Measuring Participation in VISION

In order to interpret the results of a random assignment evaluation, it is critical to understand the “dose” of services that each research group receives — in this case, the ERA program group in VISION and the control group in JOBS, Oregon’s regular welfare-to-work program. In many studies, this is relatively straightforward, because the “treatment” is easy to measure (for example, the number of hours of training or the dollar value of incentive payments). In contrast, in many of the ERA programs, including VISION, services were delivered mostly in one-on-one interactions, during which staff advised, coached, or counseled participants. This type of service is inherently difficult to measure.

In addition, to accurately measure a program’s *impact* on service receipt, it is important to collect data in the same way for both the VISION group and the JOBS group. In practice, this means that survey questions cannot refer to the ERA program in particular but, instead, must ask in general about the kinds of services that it provided, in order to understand the services that individuals in VISION accessed as compared with services accessed by the JOBS group.

MDRC sought to measure service receipt in three main ways, using the ERA 12-Month Survey. Each approach has both strengths and limitations, and each contributes to the overall analysis:

- Third, the survey asked whether respondents in each group participated in “traditional” employment-related services, such as job search workshops and training classes, and how many weeks they participated (see Table 10). These services are relatively easy to measure, but they were not the heart of most ERA programs, including VISION.
- First, the survey asked how frequently respondents in each group had had contact with staff members from employment or social service agencies and where those contacts took place (see Table 8). These questions are central to the ERA programs, but it is difficult to determine which types of staff the respondents were referring to. For example, contact with a worker who determines food stamp eligibility was likely to be quite different from contact with an ERA case manager. Moreover, it may have been difficult for respondents to recall the number of such contacts over a one-year period.
- Second, the survey asked whether respondents in each group received assistance in a variety of specific areas, some of which — such as “finding a better job while working” — were central to ERA (see Table 9). These questions are fairly straightforward, but responses do not provide any information about the *amount* of service that was received in each area.

**Box 10**

**How to Read the Tables in the ERA Evaluation**

Most tables in this report use a similar format, illustrated below. The leftmost column shows a series of participation outcomes for the VISION group and the JOBS group. For example, the table shows that about 79 (78.7) percent of the VISION group and about 70 (69.8) percent of the JOBS group participated in any employment-related activity.

Because individuals were assigned randomly either to the VISION group or to the JOBS group, the effects of the program can be estimated by the difference in outcomes between the two groups. The “Difference” column in the table shows the differences between the two research groups’ participation rates — that is, the program’s *impacts* on participation. For example, the impact on participation in any employment-related activity can be calculated by subtracting 69.8 from 78.7, yielding 8.9.

Differences marked with asterisks are “statistically significant,” meaning that it is quite unlikely that the differences arose by chance. The number of asterisks indicates whether the impact is statistically significant at the 1 percent, 5 percent, or 10 percent level (the lower the level, the less likely that the impact is due to chance). For example, as shown below, the VISION group had a statistically significant impact of 14.4 percentage points at the 5 percent level on participation in group job search/job club. (One asterisk corresponds to the 10 percent level; two asterisks, the 5 percent level; and three asterisks, the 1 percent level.) The p-value shows the exact levels of significance.

**Impacts on Participation in Employment-Related Activities**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)		P-Value
Participated in any employment-related activity (%)	78.7	69.8	8.9	*	0.091
Participated in a job search activity	78.1	69.8	8.3		0.117
Group job search/job club	63.5	49.0	14.4	**	0.013
Individual job search	67.6	60.3	7.3		0.205

While most survey respondents in both groups had at least one staff-client contact, the VISION program produced an increase in the average number of contacts. As shown in Table 8, individuals in VISION had an average of 21.8 contacts with program staff, compared with an average of 15.6 contacts for the JOBS group. VISION group members were also more likely to have in-person contacts: an average of 8.5 contacts in VISION, compared with 5.8 contacts in JOBS.

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**Table 8**

**Year 1, Impacts on Contacts with Program Staff**

**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
Any contacts with case manager/employment program since random assignment <sup>a</sup> (%)	85.3	78.6	6.7	0.144
Average number of contacts with staff/case manager	21.8	15.6	6.1 *	0.062
In person	8.5	5.8	2.7 **	0.034
By telephone	13.3	9.8	3.5	0.156
Talked with staff/case manager in past 4 weeks (%)	41.2	41.4	-0.2	0.972
Ever met with staff/case manager (%)	78.1	74.5	3.7	0.464
At home	5.3	5.4	-0.2	0.953
At workplace	3.2	4.2	-1.0	0.670
At staff/case manager's office	76.8	73.1	3.7	0.466
At school/training program	16.6	13.4	3.2	0.453
At other places	5.2	0.8	4.4 **	0.031
Staff/case manager talked with respondent's employer (%)				
Never	85.8	88.2	-2.4	0.551
Once or twice	9.4	5.2	4.2	0.195
More than twice	3.3	4.0	-0.7	0.760
Don't know	1.5	2.5	-1.0	0.537
Sample size (total = 300)	152	148		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from responses to the ERA 12-Month Survey.

NOTES: See Appendix C.

<sup>a</sup>This measure includes respondents who said "yes" on the client survey to either of the following questions: "Have you had any experiences with programs or organizations that help people find or keep jobs since your random assignment date?" "Since your random assignment date, have you had any contact, in-person or by phone, with a case manager or a staff person from an employment, welfare or other agency?" However, subsequent survey questions regarding the number and location of contacts were asked only of respondents who said "yes" to the latter question. Therefore, there are some respondents who reported contact but were not asked about the number and location of contacts.

These impacts support the fact that VISION staff worked hard to apply a customer-oriented service model by reaching out and being available to their customer-clients. Also, unlike the JOBS staff, the VISION staff were expected to make contact with clients after they were employed and with clients who were determined ineligible for TANF, which also may have contributed to these impacts.

VISION’s original program design called for staff to accommodate clients’ schedules — particularly working clients — by meeting them at locations other than the program’s offices at Winema Career Center. Nonetheless, most contacts continued to take place at the center. Among both groups of survey respondents, few meetings occurred at nontraditional locations, such as the client’s home, workplace, or school/training program (Table 8). This is not surprising, given that, in practice, the VISION staff’s time was consumed by preemployment services, which were conducted at the Career Center.

Another original goal of the VISION model was to develop relationships with potential employers — a component that failed to materialize. (See the previous section, “Implementation of the ERA Program in Salem.”) Similar to JOBS staff, most VISION staff had less than one or two contacts with employers; among survey respondents, 86 percent of VISION clients and 88 percent of JOBS clients said that their case managers had never spoken with their employer (Table 8).

## **Effects on Service Receipt**

- **Survey respondents in the VISION group were more likely than those in the JOBS group to report receiving help with retention and advancement — particularly help with retention.**

The VISION program increased the proportion of clients who reported on the survey that they had received some kind of help with retention and advancement. Among respondents in the VISION group, 34 percent reported receiving help in this area, compared with 21 percent in the JOBS group (Table 9). Underlying this was a 5 percentage point increase in the proportion of respondents who reported looking for a better job while working. Although this is encouraging in terms of advancement, the percentages of respondents who did this (9 percent in VISION, 4 percent in JOBS) are relatively low.

Instead, the 14 percentage point increase in receiving help with retention/advancement (Table 9) appears to be driven by retention-related assistance. Feeding into this overall impact, for example, is a 10 percentage point increase in VISION respondents’ likelihood of receiving help dealing with problems on the job, an 8 percentage point increase in doing such activities as life skills and child development classes while working, and an 8 percentage point increase in

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**Table 9**

**Impacts on Areas in Which Respondents Received Help  
Salem, Oregon**

Outcome (%)	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
Received help with support services	55.3	46.6	8.8	0.143
Finding or paying for child care	39.0	33.6	5.5	0.335
Finding or paying for transportation	36.1	33.9	2.2	0.702
Received help with basic needs	58.0	57.4	0.6	0.924
Housing problems	27.1	35.0	-7.9	0.162
Access to medical treatment	40.3	37.0	3.3	0.580
Financial emergency	25.5	21.1	4.3	0.399
Received help with public benefits	82.7	78.5	4.2	0.378
Getting Medicaid	55.8	55.6	0.2	0.972
Getting food stamps	80.3	75.7	4.6	0.357
Received help with job preparation	51.6	49.1	2.5	0.681
Enrolling in job readiness or training	37.4	27.8	9.5 *	0.091
Looking for a job	37.3	35.4	1.9	0.741
Finding clothes, tools, or supplies for work	29.4	21.1	8.3	0.110
Received help with retention/advancement	34.0	20.5	13.5 **	0.013
Finding a better job while working	9.0	3.6	5.3 *	0.061
Other activities while working <sup>a</sup>	20.8	12.4	8.4 *	0.067
Career assessment	16.3	10.2	6.1	0.142
Dealing with problems on the job	14.9	5.0	9.9 ***	0.006
Addressing a personal problem that makes it hard to keep a job	15.8	8.1	7.7 **	0.050
Sample size (total = 300)	152	148		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from responses to the ERA 12-Month Survey.

NOTES: See Appendix C.

<sup>a</sup>This measure includes other activities, such as life skills and child development classes.

receiving help addressing a personal problem that made it hard to keep a job. These responses underscore VISION’s ability and efforts in addressing clients’ potential barriers to retaining future or current jobs.

Given that most staff-client contacts occurred during a TANF applicant’s 45-day assessment period, it is safe to state that many retention-related discussions occurred before clients were employed. This was a goal of VISION. Staff feared that it would be difficult to maintain relationships with clients once they found employment and their participation was no longer mandated. The goal was to supply them with as much training about retention and advancement as possible during the preemployment stage, in the hope that clients would use these skills when they found jobs. Staff often felt that individual crises and issues took up too much of their time during the preemployment period and prevented them from working with clients on advancement-specific issues. (See the preceding section, “Implementation of the ERA Program in Salem.”)

- **A higher proportion of survey respondents in VISION than in JOBS participated in job search activities.**

Throughout most of the VISION program’s operations, staff were focused on engaging clients in and delivering preemployment services, which included retention and advancement services. VISION did increase the percentage of respondents who participated in any type of individual or group job search activity, from 70 percent (in JOBS) to 78 percent (Table 10).

More specifically, VISION significantly increased the proportion of clients who participated in group job search or job club: 64 percent of respondents in the VISION group, compared with 49 percent in the JOBS group. This difference could be attributed partly to the fact that VISION had unique preemployment workshops that were not available to JOBS participants. The difference might also reflect the fact (discussed further in the next section) that VISION increased the percentage of the research sample who received TANF. Further analysis has found that, after adjusting for these differences in TANF receipt, the differences in job search participation rates are no longer statistically significant. However, the overall increase in employment-related participation suggests that VISION staff were generally more successful than JOBS staff in engaging clients.

Table 10 implies that VISION participants were more likely than the JOBS group to continue with job search activities after the TANF assessment period. Survey respondents in VISION were engaged in job search activities for an average of 15 weeks — six weeks longer than respondents in the JOBS group and nine weeks beyond the required 45 days. As noted in the preceding section about program implementation, VISION was able and more willing to extend a client’s job search period, particularly if promising jobs within the client’s field of interest were on the horizon.

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**Table 10**

**Impacts on Participation in Job Search, Education, Training, and Other Activities  
Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
Ever participated in any activity <sup>a</sup> (%)	86.9	77.6	9.3 **	0.044
Participated in any employment-related activity <sup>b</sup> (%)	78.7	69.8	8.9 *	0.091
Participated in a job search activity (%)	78.1	69.8	8.3	0.117
Group job search/job club	63.5	49.0	14.4 **	0.013
Individual job search	67.6	60.3	7.3	0.205
Participated in an education/training activity <sup>c</sup> (%)	28.5	32.9	-4.4	0.442
ABE/GED	9.0	6.9	2.1	0.509
ESL	1.4	-0.1	1.5	0.129
College courses	16.0	18.7	-2.8	0.541
Vocational training	5.8	10.9	-5.1	0.126
Participated in unpaid work/subsidized employment (%)	14.8	13.8	1.0	0.803
Ever participated in an employment or education activity while working (%)	30.0	24.6	5.4	0.309
Average number of weeks participating in				
Job search activities	14.9	8.8	6.0 ***	0.001
Education/training activities	5.1	5.4	-0.4	0.804
Unpaid work/subsidized employment	3.4	2.6	0.7	0.541
Sample size (total = 300)	152	148		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from responses to the ERA 12-Month Survey.

NOTES: See Appendix C.

<sup>a</sup>"Any activity" includes employment-related activities, education/training activities, life skills, and other types of activities.

<sup>b</sup>Employment-related activities include job search activities, unpaid jobs, and on-the-job training.

<sup>c</sup>Education/training activities included adult basic education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED), and English as a Second Language ("ESL") classes.



Combined with the increased number of staff-client contacts in VISION (Table 8), these participation impacts show that the program was more successful than JOBS in engaging clients and maintaining contact with them. The lengthier participation in VISION may also reflect the program's message to "hold out" for a better job.

Given the late shift of the program to advancement services and the low rate of postemployment participation in general, the increased take-up rate and participation in job search services are most likely associated with unemployed clients rather than employed. While job search services were available to clients after employment, there is only a small difference in the proportion of survey respondents who reported having received help finding a better job while working: 9 percent in the VISION group and 4 percent in the JOBS group (Table 9).

The lack of impacts on education/training activities in Table 10 is not surprising, given that VISION did not emphasize them. While staff did try to connect clients with various training and/or work experience programs, such opportunities were limited.



## Early Economic Impacts of VISION

VISION (Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now) — the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) program in Salem, Oregon — operated from May 2002 through May 2004. The program targeted applicants for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and had mixed goals. That is, during the preemployment phase, the program was intended to provide job search assistance and career planning to participants; it promoted an employment retention message even during the preemployment phase. Then, after a participant found a job, the program was to provide postemployment services that would promote retention and advancement.

This section discusses the estimated impacts, or “effects,” that VISION had on employment and earnings, public assistance, and total income. According to the baseline data, approximately 10 percent of sample members were employed when they entered the study. Therefore, in theory, the first year of the VISION program would be expected to increase the percentage of program group members who were ever employed. Similarly, if VISION were successful in promoting employment retention, it would be expected to increase such measures as the percentage of sample members who were employed for four consecutive quarters, although this effect might not emerge immediately. Likewise, impacts on advancement might take longer to emerge than impacts on job placement, since the program started at the preemployment phase. Possible indicators of an impact on advancement would be an increase in total earnings or an improvement in job characteristics (such as the availability of benefits, including health insurance coverage).<sup>1</sup>

### One-Year Impacts on Employment, Earnings, and Public Assistance

After one year of follow-up, VISION had no statistically significant effects on employment, retention, or advancement. The program was, however, successful in increasing the take-up of important benefits, such as food stamps and publicly covered health insurance.

- **VISION generated no statistically significant impacts on employment or earnings during Year 1.**

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<sup>1</sup>For more information on the employment-related measures analyzed in this report (and what they represent), see Appendix F.

Table 11 summarizes VISION's impacts on measures of employment and earnings during the first year following each sample member's entry into the study.<sup>2</sup> These results are based only on unemployment insurance (UI) earnings data.<sup>3</sup>

Although nearly all sample members entered the program without employment, nearly two-thirds of both VISION and JOBS group members found jobs during Year 1. This is not surprising, given that the target population included many first-time welfare applicants who had relatively high levels of education. Employment, however, was quite unstable: Only about 40 percent of both research groups were still working by the end of Year 1. The average hourly wage among those who remained employed was a little higher than \$9.00 (not shown in the table).

The absence of asterisks attached to outcomes in Table 11 means that VISION did not generate any statistically significant impacts on employment or earnings during its first year. (Box 10 in the preceding section explains how to read the tables in the ERA evaluation.) In a typical quarter, about 40 percent of VISION group members were employed, compared with 42 percent of JOBS group members. Earnings for VISION group members were about \$270 below the JOBS group average of \$4,100 (as noted, this difference is not statistically significant). By the last quarter of the follow-up period, the program was still not generating increases in earnings or employment. Part of the model in Salem involved encouraging VISION clients to hold out for better jobs; however, further analysis (not shown in tables) found that the program had no effect on the amount of time that passed before participants got the first job.

In addition to total wages, UI records in Oregon record the number of hours worked within a quarter. Thus, it is possible to compute hourly wages for sample members in this study, unlike in many states where MDRC has conducted research. Table 11 shows that, among working sample members in both groups, most earned more than \$7.00 per hour. This average wage is somewhat higher than in the other ERA sites, which may reflect regional variation or the higher state minimum wage in Oregon.<sup>4</sup> VISION had no effect on the percentages that had the hourly wages in any of the categories listed in Table 11.

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<sup>2</sup>Sample members were assigned at random either to the program group, which was eligible for VISION services, or to the control group, which received services from Oregon's regular welfare-to-work program, JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training). See the Introduction for details about the random assignment research design.

<sup>3</sup>UI earnings data miss wages not reported to the UI system in Oregon. These include "off-the-books," federal, out-of-state, and military jobs as well as self-employment.

<sup>4</sup>Beginning in 2004, the minimum wage in Oregon increased to \$7.50 per hour, with annual adjustments for inflation that raised it to \$7.80 per hour in 2007 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Not all jobs are subject to minimum wage laws.

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**Table 11**

**Year 1, Impacts on UI-Covered Employment and Earnings**

**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
<b><u>Year 1</u></b>				
Ever employed (%)	62.6	62.8	-0.3	0.903
Average quarterly employment (%)	39.8	42.3	-2.5	0.188
Number of quarters employed	1.6	1.7	-0.1	0.188
Employed 4 consecutive quarters (%)	19.2	21.9	-2.8	0.176
Total earnings (\$)	3,831	4,101	-271	0.346
Earned over \$10,000 (%)	15.0	16.4	-1.4	0.451
Average hourly wage (\$) <sup>a</sup>	6.19	5.65	0.5	0.527
Average hourly wage (%)				
\$0 (not working)	37.9	37.9	0.0	0.988
Less than \$5.00	1.8	1.3	0.5	0.429
\$5.00 - \$6.99	7.3	7.2	0.1	0.964
\$7.00 - \$8.99	32.2	35.0	-2.8	0.235
\$9.00 or more	20.9	18.6	2.2	0.255
<b><u>Last quarter of Year 1</u></b>				
Ever employed (%)	39.8	42.1	-2.4	0.331
Total earnings (\$)	1,136	1,193	-58	0.550
Sample size (total = 1,504)	742	762		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from UI administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: See Appendix B.

This table includes only employment and earnings in jobs covered by the Oregon unemployment insurance (UI) program. It does not include employment outside Oregon or in jobs not covered by UI (for example, "off-the-books" jobs, some agricultural jobs, and federal government jobs).

<sup>a</sup>Hourly wages have been top-coded at \$25. Six ERA study members with UI-wage-reported earnings and no hours worked were excluded from this analysis.

- **VISION had no effects on employment and earnings across a variety of subgroups and cohorts.**

A subgroup analysis compared the effectiveness of VISION among the 681 sample members who worked in UI-covered jobs during the quarter prior to entering the study and among the 823 sample members who did not. Table 12 shows that the effectiveness of VISION did not differ depending on whether one was employed or not employed in the quarter prior to random assignment.

No systematic impacts on employment or earnings were found across subgroups defined by earnings in the year prior to random assignment or across subgroups defined by prior education, welfare history, the timing of random assignment, or employment history. Various specifications of these subgroups were attempted. An additional analysis was conducted to determine whether VISION was more effective among the subgroup that was contacted most often by the program, but it was not. Similar analyses of a subgroup that was most likely to participate in education and training and of a subgroup that was most likely to participate in job club had similar results.<sup>5</sup> The impacts are also no better for those who were randomly assigned at the end of the intake period, when the postemployment component of the program was better implemented. Finally, Appendix Table D.1 shows the impacts for an early cohort that was randomly assigned from May 16, 2002, to June 20, 2003. The two-year findings for the early cohort suggest that long-term impacts are not likely to emerge in Salem.<sup>6</sup>

- **VISION had no effect on various measures of overall employment that were captured by the ERA 12-Month Survey.**

Table 13 shows VISION's impacts on the characteristics of survey respondents' current jobs. As is often the case, employment rates from the survey are about 10 percentage points higher than the estimates based on UI records in Salem for the comparable time period. This is because the survey includes information on all jobs, not just those covered by UI records. Among survey respondents who worked, most worked full time, at jobs that paid an average wage of \$7.00 to \$9.00 per hour (which is similar to the finding from administrative records).

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<sup>5</sup>These analyses were conducted using a two-stage procedure similar to that described in Kemple and Snipes (2000). In the first stage, a regression model was used to identify baseline characteristics associated with the relevant participation or implementation outcome (number of contacts, participation in education and training, or participation in job club). Next, these parameter estimates were used to create subgroups of the program and control groups that were most likely to participate in those services. Impacts were then estimated for these three subgroups.

<sup>6</sup>The impacts in this section were computed for single-parent families only. There are no statistically significant impacts on employment or earnings for the smaller sample of two-parent families (total = 316).

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Table 12**

**Year 1, Impacts on UI-Covered Employment for Subgroups  
Defined by Employment in the Quarter Prior to Random Assignment**

**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
<b><u>Employed in the quarter prior to random assignment</u></b>				
Ever employed (%)	76.3	74.6	1.7	0.610
Average quarterly employment (%)	51.7	52.8	-1.0	0.731
Number of quarters employed	2.1	2.1	0.0	0.731
Employed 4 consecutive quarters (%)	27.5	29.3	-1.8	0.612
Total earnings (\$)	5,207	5,140	66	0.888
Earned over \$10,000 (%)	20.3	20.5	-0.2	0.946
Sample size (total = 681)	351	330		
<b><u>Not employed in the quarter prior to random assignment</u></b>				
Ever employed (%)	51.0	53.1	-2.1	0.552
Average quarterly employment (%)	29.8	33.6	-3.8	0.138
Number of quarters employed	1.2	1.3	-0.2	0.138
Employed 4 consecutive quarters (%)	12.0	16.0	-4.0	0.103
Total earnings (\$)	2,672	3,239	-566	0.112
Earned over \$10,000 (%)	10.5	12.9	-2.4	0.295
Sample size (total = 823)	391	432		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from UI administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: See Appendix B.

This table includes only employment and earnings in jobs covered by the Oregon unemployment insurance (UI) program. It does not include employment outside Oregon or in jobs not covered by UI (for example, "off-the-books" jobs, some agricultural jobs, and federal government jobs).

The Employment Retention and Advancement Project

Table 13

Impacts on Characteristics of Current Job

Salem, Oregon

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
<b><u>Employment status (%)</u></b>				
Ever employed since random assignment	74.7	75.9	-1.2	0.816
Currently employed	40.2	44.5	-4.3	0.457
No longer employed	34.5	31.4	3.1	0.588
Current working status				
Full time	30.1	33.3	-3.2	0.568
Part time	10.1	11.3	-1.2	0.752
Currently employed at a "good job" <sup>a</sup>	14.7	15.3	-0.6	0.896
<b><u>Hours</u></b>				
Average hours per week	13.6	14.5	-0.9	0.671
Average hourly wage (%)				
Less than \$5.00	2.8	3.2	-0.4	0.845
\$5.00 - \$6.99	3.0	4.4	-1.5	0.528
\$7.00 - \$8.99	18.6	18.8	-0.2	0.967
\$9.00 or more	15.9	18.1	-2.3	0.610
<b><u>Earnings (\$)</u></b>				
Average weekly earnings	120	132	-12	0.587
<b><u>Benefits (%)</u></b>				
Employer-provided benefits at current job				
Sick days with full pay	11.5	18.0	-6.5	0.124
Paid vacation	16.1	21.3	-5.1	0.267
Paid holidays other than Christmas and New Year	12.9	17.1	-4.2	0.323
Dental benefits	13.8	16.9	-3.2	0.468
A retirement plan	11.3	14.8	-3.5	0.389
A health plan or medical insurance	15.2	20.9	-5.7	0.214
<b><u>Schedule<sup>b</sup> (%)</u></b>				
Regular	23.3	22.0	1.3	0.800
Split	0.5	3.6	-3.1 *	0.070
Irregular	3.3	2.0	1.3	0.489
Evening shift	4.4	5.6	-1.2	0.659
Night shift	4.1	2.6	1.5	0.501
Rotating shift	2.9	7.1	-4.2	0.111
Other schedule	0.0	0.7	-0.7	0.348
Odd job	1.7	1.0	0.7	0.595
Sample size (total = 300)	152	148		

(continued)



### Table 13 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the ERA 12-Month Survey

NOTES: See Appendix C.

<sup>a</sup>A "good job" is one that offers 35 or more hours per week, makes \$7 per hour, and receives health insurance. If a job does not offer health insurance, a "good job" is a job in which a respondent works 35 or more hours per week and makes \$8.50 or more per hour and does not include health insurance. (Johnson and Corcoran, 2003).

<sup>b</sup>A split shift is defined as one consisting of two distinct periods each day. An irregular schedule is defined as one that changes from day to day. A rotating shift is one that changes regularly from days to evenings to nights.

Very few sample members had employer-provided benefits. For example, only about 20 percent of both groups were working at jobs that offered a medical plan or health insurance.

The findings from the survey are consistent with the administrative records. There are no statistically significant impacts across a wide array of outcome measures. VISION clearly had no statistically significant effects on employment, employment retention, or advancement. At the time of the survey, 40 percent of respondents in the VISION group reported that they were employed, which is not statistically different from the average for respondents in the JOBS group.

A goal of the ERA program in Salem was to help attain better work conditions for sample members. An element of this would be to improve work schedules, wages, and benefits — all elements of advancement. However, the program did not have a statistically significant effect on any of these areas. The estimated effect on average hours worked is also close to zero.

- **VISION substantially increased public assistance receipt but had no statistically significant effect on total income.**

Table 14 shows the impacts on public assistance receipt and “measured income” (the sum of UI earnings, TANF benefits, and food stamps). Even though the target sample in Salem includes TANF applicants, less than two-thirds ever received TANF in Year 1; it is possible that the 45-day assessment period reduced this percentage. Nearly all sample members in Salem, however, received food stamps. Approximately 58 percent of income shown in Table 14 came from TANF and food stamps. The combined income from these two sources plus UI earnings in Year 1 puts the average sample member well below the federal poverty line.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>A fuller version of income that includes income from jobs not covered by the UI system and from other household members, child support, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and other sources is available from the ERA 12-Month Survey. This measure suggests that household income among control group members is at  
(continued)

VISION also increased the percentage of clients receiving public assistance (Table 14). Program group members were almost 6 percentage points more likely than control group members to have ever received TANF. Year 1 TANF payments were \$365 (or 19 percent) higher among the VISION group than the JOBS group average of \$1,954. The VISION group also received \$160 more in food stamp payments than the JOBS group average of \$2,579 in Year 1. VISION had no effect on the percentage receiving food stamps during Year 1.

As discussed in the section “Implementation of the ERA Program in Salem,” the increase in TANF may be a product of VISION staff efforts to help clients navigate the application process. It also may be related to staff efforts to maintain contact with clients and to encourage them to take up benefits for which they were eligible. VISION staff maintained contact even with sample members who were not eligible for assistance. Thus, if circumstances changed and clients became eligible for assistance, VISION staff immediately connected them with assistance. The statistically significant increase in TANF payments emerged in Quarter 2 (soon after or during the 45-day assessment period, depending on the timing of random assignment).<sup>8</sup> The increase in food stamp receipt emerged in Quarter 1, and the increase in food stamp payments emerged in Quarter 2 (Appendix Table D.5). These findings are consistent with the hypotheses offered at the beginning of this paragraph. The increase in food stamp receipt is a very positive impact, particularly in Oregon, which was identified in a 2003 study as one of the “hungeriest” states in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

By the last quarter of Year 1, both TANF and food stamp receipt rates had dropped approximately 17 percentage points among control group members. These declines are not surprising among a population of new welfare applicants. At the end of Year 1, TANF receipt rates and payments and food stamp payments were still higher among ERA group members. The bottom rows of Table 14 show various combinations of work and welfare receipt. The measures show that VISION decreased the percentage of the sample who were employed without receiving TANF and that it increased the percentage who were receiving TANF without working.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the increase in food stamp receipt was concentrated among those who were not employed (result not shown in table). Thus, in this context, food stamps cannot be viewed as a “support for work” but, rather, as an income maintenance tool and an antihunger strategy.

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least \$12,000 annually (still below the federal poverty level for a family of three but much higher than the partial estimate available from the administrative records). In addition, neither measure includes an estimate of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), an important source of income for low-wage workers.

<sup>8</sup>While the impact on TANF receipt began to emerge in Quarter 2, it did not become significant until Quarter 3. Quarterly TANF and food stamp outcomes are shown in Appendix Table D.5.

<sup>9</sup>Nord, Andrews, and Carlson (2003).

<sup>10</sup>A combination of the relatively low TANF grant level in Oregon and the relatively high state minimum wage makes it relatively rare to combine work and welfare in Oregon. Thus, increases in TANF receipt tend to be among those who are not working.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Table 14**

**Year 1, Impacts on Public Assistance Receipt and Measured Income**

**Salem, Oregon**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>VISION Group</b>	<b>JOBS Group</b>	<b>Difference (Impact)</b>	<b>P-Value</b>
Earnings (\$)	3,488	3,605	-117	0.735
Ever received TANF (%)	64.1	58.5	5.6 *	0.074
Amount of TANF received (\$)	2,319	1,954	365 **	0.014
Ever received food stamps (%)	94.1	93.6	0.5	0.720
Amount of food stamps received (\$)	2,739	2,579	160 **	0.044
Number of months receiving TANF	4.9	4.1	0.8 ***	0.008
Number of months receiving food stamps	9.6	9.2	0.4 *	0.077
Total measured income <sup>a</sup>	8,546	8,138	409	0.243
<b><u>Last quarter of Year 1</u></b>				
Ever received TANF (%)	39.5	32.3	7.2 **	0.017
Amount of TANF received (\$)	495	400	96 **	0.022
Ever received food stamps (%)	77.9	74.0	3.9	0.142
Amount of food stamps received (\$)	626	566	60 **	0.025
<b>Combinations of work and welfare receipt (%)</b>				
Employed, not receiving TANF	27.2	32.1	-4.9 *	0.093
Employed, receiving TANF	10.5	8.6	1.9	0.321
Not employed, receiving TANF	29.0	23.7	5.4 *	0.053
Not employed, not receiving TANF	33.3	35.7	-2.4	0.435
Received no measured income (%)	13.8	17.6	-3.8	0.102
<b>Sample size (total = 977)</b>	<b>478</b>	<b>499</b>		

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from UI, TANF, and food stamp administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: See Appendix B.

This table includes only earnings in jobs covered by the Oregon unemployment insurance (UI) program. It does not include employment outside Oregon or in jobs not covered by UI (for example "off-the-books" jobs, some agricultural jobs, and federal government jobs).

Consistent with the findings for the full research sample based on administrative records, VISION group members in the survey respondent sample also experienced statistically significant increases in public assistance receipt. Appendix Table D.3 shows that VISION group members were 12 percentage points more likely than the JOBS group to receive TANF, food stamps, or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). VISION group members were also almost 12 percentage points more likely to receive food stamps and almost 6 percentage points more likely to receive SSI or disability payments.

The lower panel of Appendix Table D.3 shows that VISION group members were also 12 percentage points more likely to have health care coverage from any provider (88 percent of the VISION group, compared with the JOBS group average of 76 percent). Most of this improvement was due to an increase in publicly funded health insurance. This is a large and very-positive impact that may be related to the finding that VISION group respondents in Salem were nearly 10 percentage points more likely than JOBS group respondents to report being in good health (not shown in tables). Program operators indicated that VISION marketed the state-provided extended medical care as an extra job retention tool and work support. VISION had no significant impacts on the receipt of privately funded health care coverage — as would be expected, since the program had no significant effect on employment (Appendix Table D.3).

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Though one year of follow-up is far from definitive, the VISION program's impacts on employment, retention, and advancement are not encouraging. Overall, it seems that a combination of factors made it difficult for VISION to achieve its goals.

- **Program operators indicated that a pre- to postemployment model of retention and advancement was difficult to implement. Furthermore, staff had a difficult time understanding how to operationalize advancement in the context of everyday services.**

The program model appears to require a great deal of specialization and staff. Having the same staff responsible for both pre- and postemployment services may have been possible only with very small caseloads. Otherwise, job placement and reemployment naturally take priority over job retention and career advancement.

VISION's program design would likely have been more successful had staff been equally comfortable and skilled in providing both the retention and the advancement service components. The postemployment component was most fully implemented late in the evaluation period, and there were some increases in participation in retention and advancement services. Thus, VISION may have benefited if staff had first had a chance to understand and gain

experience in the less familiar advancement component. VISION case managers needed to buy into the concept of advancement in general, and training and employment specialists needed to build confidence in their career-coaching abilities.

- **A challenging external environment can prevent a program model from being implemented as intended.**

Oregon's weak economy, state staffing cutbacks, staff turnover, a hiring freeze, and management staff whose time was divided among a number of competing duties impacted the VISION program throughout the evaluation. The hiring freeze in 2002 affected both clients and caseworkers. Clients were unable to find jobs in the public sector — a major employer of former welfare recipients in Salem — and staff became overextended and burned-out as program positions went unfilled. In addition, VISION was evaluated against a competing program, JOBS, that had a strong work-first focus. While it may be that, in difficult external circumstances, a program like VISION is unlikely to generate impacts, other ERA sites that have attempted to work with clients both before and after employment have also had serious operational difficulties, even under better circumstances.

- **It is important to account for institutional differences when merging line staff of partner organizations.**

Conflicting work cultures and philosophies came into play when merging community college and welfare staff in the Salem ERA program. VISION managers not only had to align partner organizations but also had to account for the different environments and operating cultures to which staff were accustomed. Facilitating communication and establishing clearer program boundaries up-front may have helped.

\* \* \*

It is likely that some combination of the factors above contributed to the weak impacts of the VISION program, compared with the JOBS program, to date. However, these results are not the final word on the ERA program in Salem. MDRC will continue to track the impacts of VISION using unemployment insurance records.



Appendix A  
**Supplementary Tables for  
“Introduction”**





**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Appendix Table A.1**

**Description of ERA Models**

State	Location	Target Group	Primary Service Strategies
<b><u>Advancement projects</u></b>			
Illinois	Cook County (Chicago)	TANF recipients who have worked at least 30 hours per week for at least 6 consecutive months	A combination of services to promote career advancement (targeted job search assistance, education and training, assistance in identifying and accessing career ladders, etc.)
California	Riverside County Phase 2 (Work Plus)	Newly employed TANF recipients working at least 20 hours per week	Operated by the county welfare department; connects employed TANF recipients to education and training activities
California	Riverside County Phase 2 (Training Focused)	Newly employed TANF recipients working at least 20 hours per week	Operated by the county workforce agency; connects employed TANF recipients to education and training activities with the option of reducing or eliminating their work hours
<b><u>Placement and retention (hard-to-employ) projects</u></b>			
Minnesota	Hennepin County (Minneapolis)	Long-term TANF recipients who were unable to find jobs through standard welfare-to-work services	In-depth family assessment; low caseloads; intensive monitoring and follow-up; emphasis on placement into unsubsidized employment or supported work with referrals to education and training, counseling, and other support services
Oregon	Portland	Individuals who are cycling back onto TANF and those who have lost jobs	Team-based case management, job search/job readiness components, intensive retention and follow-up services, mental health and substance abuse services for those identified with these barriers, supportive and emergency services

(continued)

**Appendix Table A.1 (continued)**

State	Location	Target Group	Primary Service Strategies
<b><u>Placement and retention (hard-to-employ) projects (continued)</u></b>			
New York	New York City PRIDE (Personal Roads to Individual Development and Employment)	TANF recipients whose employability is limited by physical or mental health problems	Two main tracks: (1) Vocational Rehabilitation, where clients with severe medical problems receive unpaid work experience, job search/job placement and retention services tailored to account for medical problems; (2) Work Based Education, where those with less severe medical problems participate in unpaid work experience, job placement services, and adult basic education
New York	New York City Substance Abuse (substance abuse case management)	TANF recipients with a substance abuse problem	Intensive case management to promote participation in substance abuse treatment, links to mental health and other needed services
<b><u>Projects with mixed goals</u></b>			
California	Los Angeles County EJC (Enhanced Job Club)	TANF recipients who are required to search for employment	Job search workshops promoting a step-down method designed to help participants find a job that is in line with their careers of interest
California	Los Angeles County (Reach for Success program)	Newly employed TANF recipients working at least 32 hours per week	Stabilization/retention services, followed by a combination of services to promote advancement: education and training, career assessment, targeted job development, etc.
California	Riverside County PASS (Post-Assistance Self-Sufficiency program)	Individuals who left TANF due to earned income	Family-based support services delivered by community-based organizations to promote retention and advancement

(continued)

**Appendix Table A.1 (continued)**

State	Location	Target Group	Primary Service Strategies
<b><u>Projects with mixed goals (continued)</u></b>			
Ohio	Cleveland	Low-wage workers with specific employers making under 200% of poverty who have been in their current jobs less than 6 months	Regular on-site office hours for counseling/case management; Lunch & Learn meetings for social support and presentations; and supervisory training for employer supervisors
Oregon	Eugene	Newly employed TANF applicants and recipients working 20 hours per week or more; mostly single mothers who were underemployed	Emphasis on work-based and education/training-based approaches to advancement and on frequent contact with clients; assistance tailored to clients' career interests and personal circumstances
Oregon	Medford	Newly employed TANF recipients and employed participants of the Oregon Food Stamp Employment and Training program and the Employment Related Day Care program; mostly single mothers	Emphasis on work-based and on education/training-based approaches to advancement and on frequent contact with clients; assistance tailored to clients' career interests and personal circumstances; access to public benefits purposefully divorced from the delivery of retention and advancement services
Oregon	Salem	TANF applicants	Job search assistance combined with career planning; once employed, education and training, employer linkages to promote retention and advancement
South Carolina	6 rural counties in the Pee Dee Region	Individuals who left TANF (for any reason) between 10/97 and 12/00	Individualized case management with a focus on reemployment, support services, job search, career counseling, education and training, and use of individualized incentives
Texas	Corpus Christi, Fort Worth, and Houston	TANF applicants and recipients	Individualized team-based case management; monthly stipends of \$200 for those who maintain employment and complete activities related to employment plan

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Appendix Table A.2**

**Selected Characteristics of Sample Members at Baseline, by Research Group  
Salem, Oregon**

Characteristic	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Total
Gender (%)			
Female	89.4	89.8	89.6
U.S. citizenship (%)	98.8	97.9	98.3
Primary language (%)			
English	97.8	97.1	97.5
Spanish	1.2	2.0	1.6
Other	0.9	0.9	0.9
Race/ethnicity (%)			
White, non-Hispanic	72.4	68.3	70.3
Black, non-Hispanic	2.2	3.2	2.7
American Indian, Alaska native, Asian/Pacific islander	4.4	5.4	4.9
Hispanic	14.2	16.5	15.4
Other	6.8	6.6	6.7
Age (%)			
Younger than 20	9.4	9.3	9.4
21-30	50.8	52.8	51.8
31-40	28.8	26.7	27.7
Older than 40	10.9	11.2	11.0
Average age (years)	29.6	29.4	29.5
Education (%)			
General Educational Development (GED) certificate	27.0	28.5	27.7
High school diploma	30.2	31.9	31.1
Technical certificate/associate's degree/2-year college program	7.5	7.5	7.5
4 years (or more) of college	2.4	2.0	2.2
None of the above	32.9	30.1	31.5
Housing status (%)			
Rent, public housing	5.9	6.4	6.2
Rent, subsidized housing	12.1	11.0	11.6
Rent, other (unsubsidized)	41.1	43.4	42.3
Own home or apartment	3.0	2.9	2.9
Emergency or temporary housing	25.2	26.9	26.1
Other, living with friends/relatives	12.7	9.3	11.0

(continued)

**Appendix Table A.2 (continued)**

Characteristic	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Total
Current cash assistance status (%)			
Applicant	99.9	100.0	99.9
Recipient	0.1	0.0	0.1
Registration status (%)			
Mandatory	90.0	89.6	89.8
Exempt <sup>a</sup>	10.0	10.4	10.2
Total prior AFDC/TANF receipt (%)			
None	41.1	41.5	41.3
Less than 3 months	6.6	6.8	6.7
3 months or more and less than 2 years	31.5	32.2	31.8
2 years or more and less than 5 years	15.0	13.3	14.1
5 years or more and less than 10 years	5.7	6.2	5.9
10 years or more	0.1	0.1	0.1
Months employed in past 3 years (%)			
0 (Did not work)	11.2	10.0	10.6
6 or less	10.5	12.3	11.4
7 to 12	15.4	16.5	16.0
13 to 24	19.0	15.5	17.2
More than 24	43.9	45.7	44.8
Currently employed (%)	9.2	9.6	9.4
Number of children (%)			
0	4.7	3.9	4.3
1	43.3	48.0	45.7
2	32.2	30.4	31.3
3 or more	19.8	17.6	18.7
Age of youngest child (%)			
2 or younger	40.7	42.1	41.4
3 to 5	23.2	23.2	23.2
6 or older	36.1	34.7	35.4
Sample size (total = 1,504)	742	762	

SOURCE: Oregon baseline information sheets.

NOTES: A chi-squared test for categorical variables and a t-test for continuous variables were run to determine whether there is a difference in the distribution of the characteristics across research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

<sup>a</sup>In contrast to the regular welfare-to-work program, VISION actively engaged and provided services to those determined to be medically exempt.



**Appendix B**

**Notes for Tables and Figures Displaying Results  
Calculated with Administrative Records Data**





Estimates were regression-adjusted using ordinary least squares, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics of sample members.

Estimates were regression-adjusted using ordinary least squares, controlling for sample members' characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating sums and differences.

Total measured income represents the sum of unemployment insurance (UI) earnings, TANF, and food stamps.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between outcomes for the program and control groups.

Average quarterly employment was computed by adding up the number of quarters employed and dividing by the total number of quarters potentially employed.

*Italic type indicates comparisons that are nonexperimental. These measures are computed only for sample members who were employed. Since there may be differences in the characteristics of program group and control group members who were employed, any differences in outcomes may not necessarily be attributable to the ERA program. Statistical tests were not performed.*

“Year 1” refers to Quarters 2 to 5. Quarter 1 is the quarter in which random assignment took place.

Dollar averages include zero values for sample members who were not employed or were not receiving TANF or food stamps.

The p-value indicates the degree of likelihood that the difference between the program and control groups arose by chance.

Random assignment extended from May 2002 through May 2004. The full research sample includes all single parents who were randomly assigned in Salem. Employment and earnings outcomes are available for the full research sample. One year of follow-up data on outcomes of public assistance are available only for those sample members who were randomly assigned from May 2002 through September 2003.

NA = not applicable.

For more information on how to read the tables in this report, see Box 10.



**Appendix C**

**Notes for Tables and Figures Displaying Results  
Calculated with Responses to the ERA 12-Month Survey**



Estimates were regression-adjusted using ordinary least squares, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics of sample members.

Estimates were regression-adjusted using ordinary least squares, controlling for sample members' characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating sums and differences.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between outcomes for the program and control groups.

*Italic type indicates comparisons that are nonexperimental. These measures are computed only for sample members who were employed. Since there may be differences in the characteristics of program group and control group members who were employed, any differences in outcomes may not necessarily be attributable to the ERA program. Statistical tests were not performed.*

The p-value indicates the degree of likelihood that the difference between the program and control groups arose by chance.

All exhibits based on responses to the ERA 12-Month Survey pertain only to the single-parent sample.

NA = not applicable.

For more information on how to read the tables in this report, see Box 10.



**Appendix D**

**Supplementary Tables for**

**“Early Economic Impacts of VISION”**





**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Appendix Table D.1**  
**Impacts on Quarterly UI-Covered Employment and Earnings**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
<b><u>Full research sample<sup>a</sup></u></b>				
Employment by quarter (%)				
Q1	41.8	43.7	-1.9	0.371
Q2	39.7	41.3	-1.6	0.512
Q3	40.3	44.3	-4.0	0.109
Q4	39.4	41.6	-2.2	0.373
Q5	39.8	42.1	-2.4	0.331
Earnings by quarter (\$)				
Q1	621	667	-46.1	0.317
Q2	706	777	-71.7	0.309
Q3	925	1,025	-99.6	0.233
Q4	1,064	1,106	-41.8	0.652
Q5	1,136	1,193	-57.6	0.550
Sample size (total = 1,504)	742	762		
<b><u>Early cohort<sup>b</sup></u></b>				
Employment by quarter (%)				
Q1	42.3	46.4	-4.1	0.155
Q2	39.0	41.4	-2.5	0.478
Q3	39.2	41.8	-2.6	0.446
Q4	35.7	39.2	-3.5	0.311
Q5	36.7	39.9	-3.2	0.350
Q6	36.3	40.1	-3.7	0.270
Q7	38.3	41.8	-3.5	0.306
Q8	40.7	40.8	-0.1	0.966
Q9	41.1	42.4	-1.3	0.709
Earnings by quarter (\$)				
Q1	726	749	-23.2	0.729
Q2	679	702	-23.6	0.803
Q3	896	908	-12.7	0.908
Q4	970	941	29.1	0.810
Q5	1,054	1,043	10.9	0.932
Q6	1,092	1,125	-33.0	0.809
Q7	1,230	1,151	78.6	0.574
Q8	1,321	1,282	38.9	0.794
Q9	1,384	1,332	51.9	0.728
Sample size (total = 798)	391	407		

(continued)

### **Appendix Table D.1 (continued)**

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from UI administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: See Appendix B.

<sup>a</sup>Members of the full research sample were randomly assigned from May 16, 2002, to May 17, 2004.

<sup>b</sup>Members of the early cohort were randomly assigned from May 16, 2002, to June 20, 2003.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Appendix Table D.2**  
**Year 1, Impacts on UI-Covered Employment and Earnings,**  
**Including Standard Errors**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value	Standard Error
<b><u>Year 1</u></b>					
Ever employed (%)	62.6	62.8	-0.3	0.903	2.39
Average quarterly employment (%)	39.8	42.3	-2.5	0.188	1.93
Number of quarters employed	1.6	1.7	-0.1	0.188	0.08
Employed 4 consecutive quarters (%)	19.2	21.9	-2.8	0.176	2.04
Total earnings (\$)	3,831	4,101	-271	0.346	287
Earned over \$10,000 (%)	15.0	16.4	-1.4	0.451	1.83
Average hourly wage during Year 1 (\$) <sup>a</sup>	6.19	5.65	0.5	0.527	0.86
<b><u>Last quarter of Year 1</u></b>					
Ever employed (%)	39.8	42.1	-2.4	0.331	2.45
Total earnings (\$)	1,136	1,193	-58	0.550	96
Sample size (total = 1,504)	742	762			

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from UI administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: See Appendix B.

This table includes only employment and earnings in jobs covered by the Oregon unemployment insurance (UI) program. It does not include employment outside Oregon or in jobs not covered by UI (for example, "off-the-books" jobs, some agricultural jobs, and federal government jobs).

<sup>a</sup>Hourly wages have been top-coded at \$25. ERA study members with UI-wage-reported earnings and no hours worked were excluded from this analysis.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Appendix Table D.3**  
**Impacts on Household Income and Health Care Coverage**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
<b><u>Household income</u></b>				
Percentage with each income source (%)				
Own earnings	43.9	50.8	-6.9	0.242
Earnings of other household members	29.6	37.2	-7.5	0.167
Child support	19.5	16.5	3.0	0.513
Public assistance	88.8	76.4	12.4 ***	0.004
TANF	37.7	28.9	8.8	0.118
Food stamps	85.4	73.8	11.7 **	0.010
SSI or disability	9.4	3.9	5.5 *	0.068
Total household income in prior month (\$)	1,397	1,426	-29	0.834
Percentage of household income that is respondent's (%)	76.8	70.4	6.4	0.117
Alternative household income (\$) <sup>a</sup>	1,045	923	123	0.202
<b><u>Health care coverage</u></b>				
Respondent has health care coverage (%) <sup>b</sup>				
Publicly funded	87.8	76.1	11.8 **	0.012
Publicly funded and not on TANF or SSI	75.3	61.2	14.1 ***	0.009
Privately funded	32.6	29.3	3.3	0.567
All dependent children have health care coverage (%)	22.1	21.9	0.2	0.968
All dependent children have health care coverage and respondent is not covered by TANF or SSI (%)	87.9	86.1	1.8	0.643
Respondent and all children have health care coverage (%)	46.3	56.5	-10.2 *	0.087
Respondent and all children have health care coverage and respondent is not covered by TANF or SSI (%)	84.2	72.3	11.9 **	0.014
Sample size (total = 300)	42.0	41.4	0.6	0.920
	152	148		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from responses to the ERA 12-Month Survey.

NOTES: See Appendix C.

<sup>a</sup>This measure was created by combining administrative records data and respondents' earnings from the survey. It includes survey earnings or UI earnings where available, food stamps, AFDC, and estimated EITC income in the month prior to the survey.

<sup>b</sup>Measures of health coverage combine data from the survey sections covering employment, health care coverage, and income and from administrative records on public assistance receipt. A person can be receiving both public and private health insurance.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Appendix Table D.4**

**Impacts on Job Retention**

**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
Ever employed in Year 1 (%)	67.4	71.4	-4.0	0.473
Average months employed in Year 1	5.0	5.4	-0.4	0.496
Total months employed in Year 1 (%)				
Less than 4	12.1	13.3	-1.2	0.760
4 to 7	20.3	19.7	0.6	0.904
8 to 10	15.8	16.9	-1.0	0.818
More than 10	19.2	21.5	-2.3	0.627
Worked during Months 1 to 3 and worked for (%)				
Less than 6 consecutive months	14.1	13.2	0.8	0.842
6 or more consecutive months	31.4	30.6	0.8	0.876
Number of jobs in Year 1 (%)				
0	32.6	28.6	4.0	0.473
1	48.0	37.8	10.2 *	0.094
2 or 3	17.2	31.7	-14.4 ***	0.005
4 or more	2.1	1.9	0.3	0.885
Ever worked for one employer for 6 months or more (%)	42.3	38.3	4.1	0.493
Sample size (total = 300)	152	148		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the ERA 12-Month Survey

NOTES: See Appendix C.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Appendix Table D.5**  
**Year 1, Impacts on Public Assistance Receipt, by Quarter**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
Ever received TANF (%)				
Quarter of random assignment	30.7	32.8	-2.1	0.473
Q2	53.2	49.1	4.1	0.199
Q3	49.2	42.2	7.0 **	0.029
Q4	42.5	35.8	6.7 **	0.032
Q5	39.5	32.3	7.2 **	0.017
Amount of TANF received (\$)				
Quarter of random assignment	593	565	29	0.142
Q2	779	726	53 **	0.011
Q3	690	668	22	0.377
Q4	643	619	25	0.342
Q5	626	566	60 **	0.025
Ever received food stamps (%)				
Quarter of random assignment	90.5	87.1	3.4 *	0.066
Q2	93.2	90.3	2.8 *	0.100
Q3	86.3	84.7	1.7	0.450
Q4	81.7	78.9	2.8	0.266
Q5	77.9	74.0	3.9	0.142
Amount of food stamps received (\$)				
Quarter of random assignment	215	204	11	0.639
Q2	663	585	78 *	0.077
Q3	614	525	89 **	0.047
Q4	547	445	102 **	0.018
Q5	495	400	96 **	0.022
Sample size (total = 977)	478	499		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from TANF and food stamp administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: See Appendix B.

**Appendix E**

**ERA 12-Month Survey Response Analysis  
for Salem, Oregon**





VISION (Valuing Individual Success and Increasing Opportunities Now) — the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) program in Salem, Oregon — operated from May 2002 through May 2004. The program targeted applicants for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and offered both preemployment and postemployment services. This report evaluates the results achieved by VISION in comparison with JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training), Oregon’s regular welfare-to-work program.

The ERA 12-Month Survey provides information on participation in various activities and services, health care coverage, characteristics of current job, household composition, and other measures presented in this report. This appendix assesses the reliability of impact results for the survey. It also examines whether the impacts for the survey respondents can be generalized to the impacts for the full research sample. First the appendix describes how the survey sample was selected, and then it discusses the response rates for the survey sample and for the two research groups — the program group (VISION) and the control group (JOBS). Next, differences between survey respondents and survey nonrespondents are examined, followed by a comparison between the research groups among the survey respondents. Finally, administrative records data are used to compare the impacts across the research sample, the fielded sample, and the respondent sample. Box E.1 outlines the key analysis samples used in this evaluation.

This analysis found that survey respondents had more extensive employment histories and higher prior earnings than nonrespondents did. When the characteristics of survey respondents differ greatly from those of nonrespondents, one option is to weight the results so that the underrepresented characteristics are given greater influence. However, it was decided that weighting the results was unnecessary for the following reasons:

- The impacts on employment and welfare receipt for the respondent sample are similar to the impacts for the research sample and the fielded sample.
- Among those who responded to the survey, there are no systematic differences across the research groups.

## Survey Sample Selection

As noted in the report’s Introduction, the *research sample* includes 1,504 single-parent sample members who were randomly assigned into either the program group or the control group from May 2002 through May 2004. The *fielded sample* includes 418 sample members who were randomly assigned from May to October 2003 who met the eligibility criteria to participate in the survey. Anyone younger than age 18 and anyone who did not speak English or Spanish was excluded from the survey-eligible sample. The fielded sample constitutes about 27 percent of the research sample and covers only about 25 percent of the full sample intake pe-

riod. The *respondent sample* was split equally between the ERA program group (VISION) and the control group (JOBS).

### Box E.1

#### Key Analysis Samples

**Research sample.** All single parents who were randomly assigned during the sample intake period, which ranged from May 2002, through May 2004.

**Fielded sample.** Sample members in the research sample who were randomly assigned during the months in which the survey sample was selected and who met the eligibility criteria to be interviewed for the survey.

**Respondent sample.** Sample members in the fielded sample who completed the ERA 12-Month Survey.

**Nonrespondent sample.** Sample members in the fielded sample who were not interviewed because they were not located or refused to be interviewed or because of other reasons.

## Survey Response Rates

Sample members who were interviewed for the ERA 12-Month Survey are referred to as “survey respondents,” while sample members who were not interviewed are known as “non-respondents.”

A total of 300 sample members, or 72 percent of the fielded sample, completed the survey. Among the nonrespondent sample, 94 percent refused to be interviewed or could not be located.<sup>1</sup> The response rates for the two research groups are similar: 73 percent of VISION group members completed the survey, compared with 70 percent of JOBS group members.

Although these overall response rates are fairly high, whenever the response rate is lower than 100 percent, nonresponse bias may occur. That is, differences may exist between the respondent sample and the larger fielded sample, owing to differences between those sample members who complete a survey and those who do not. Furthermore, the estimates may be biased if the background characteristics differ between the research groups.

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<sup>1</sup>Other potential respondents were not interviewed because they were incapacitated, institutionalized, located after the fielding period expired, or deceased.

## Comparison Between Respondents and Nonrespondents Within the Survey Sample

In order to examine whether there are systematic differences between those who responded to the survey and those who did not, an indicator of survey response status was created, and then multivariate analysis was used to identify which pre-random assignment characteristics are significantly related to the indicator.

Appendix Table E.1 shows the estimated logistic regression coefficients for the probability of being a respondent to the ERA 12-Month Survey. As can be noted from this table, besides such background characteristics as race, age, and number of children, a research status indicator was included in the model (see the bottom row). The first column of the table provides the odds ratio for each variable in predicting the probability of completing the survey. The asterisks and the p-values show the statistical significance of these relationships, and the standardized estimate provides a measure of the effect size.

Overall, the model was successful in predicting response to the survey (model  $\chi^2(17) = 33.95$ ; p value = less than 1 percent). The most important predictors of response were previous employment (p-value = less than 5 percent), followed by prior earnings and employment in the quarter prior to random assignment. All three characteristics were positively related to response, which implies that those who responded had a somewhat more extensive employment history than those who did not respond. For example, the odds ratios suggest that those who were employed in the quarter prior to entering the program were 1.7 times more likely to respond than those who were not employed. Receipt of welfare in the year prior to random assignment was negatively associated with response. Though the extent of response bias is relatively minor, the results suggest that the respondent sample was somewhat more advantaged than the overall research sample.<sup>2</sup>

Further analysis (not shown in tables) compared the average outcomes for the variables identified by the logistic model as being most predictive of survey response. Earnings over the prior three years were \$16,373 among respondents, compared with \$14,131 among nonrespondents. In the prior three years, respondents were employed 6.0 quarters, on average, compared with 4.6 quarters among nonrespondents. Approximately 48 percent of respondents were employed in the quarter prior to the study, compared with 31 percent of nonrespondents. Approxi-

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<sup>2</sup>For example, a sample member who did not work in the three years prior to the survey and who received welfare in the prior year had only a 42 percent predicted probability of responding to the survey. (This client did not respond.)

The Employment Retention and Advancement Project

Appendix Table E.1

Estimated Logistic Regression Coefficients for the Probability of Being a Respondent to the ERA 12-Month Survey

Salem, Oregon

	Survey Sample		Standardized Estimate
	Odds Ratio	P-Value	
ERA group	1.157	0.524	0.040
Age of the youngest child	1.001	0.978	0.002
Number of children	1.137	0.328	0.075
Black, non-Hispanic	2.571	0.306	0.076
White	1.485	0.131	0.097
No high school diploma or GED	0.710	0.156	-0.089
Employed in the quarter before random assignment	1.717 *	0.061	0.148
Female	1.344	0.450	0.049
Month of sample intake	0.977	0.691	-0.025
21-30 years of age	0.505	0.128	-0.189
31-40 years of age	0.472	0.164	-0.186
41 years old or older	0.872	0.839	-0.023
Received food stamps in the prior year	1.042	0.886	0.010
Received AFDC in the prior year	0.545 **	0.042	-0.140
Earnings in the prior 3 years	1.000 **	0.031	-0.226
Number of quarters employed in the prior 3 years	1.126 **	0.019	0.278
Pseudo R-square (0.1121)			
$\chi^2(17)$	33.95 ***		
Sample size	418		

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from administrative records from the State of Oregon and baseline information form.

NOTE: Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

mately 26 percent of those who responded were on welfare in the year before the study, compared with 21 percent of nonrespondents. Though some of these differences are large — since the average characteristics are similar across the research groups (discussed below) and since the impacts are similar among respondents and nonrespondents — MDRC decided not to weight the survey results.

## Comparison Between the Research Groups in the Respondent Sample

Random assignment designs minimize the possibility of potential bias. Although the response rates are high for both research groups, there is still the possibility that the survey sampling and response process may allow differences to emerge between respondents in the ERA group and those in the control group. Specifically, if ERA group respondents differ systematically from control group respondents, then the integrity of the experiment can be compromised, and the measured impacts may not be wholly attributable to the ERA program.

Appendix Table E.2 shows selected characteristics of the VISION and JOBS group members at baseline, the time of random assignment. The differences between the groups were relatively small. Both a chi-square test and a t-test were used to determine whether there were significant differences between the VISION and JOBS group members. The only significant difference was in the percentage of the sample in mandatory registration status. Furthermore, a logistic regression analysis was performed to test further whether or not there was a relationship between the background characteristics and the research status. A 0/1 dummy indicating the research status was regressed on pre-random assignment characteristics — many of which are shown in Appendix Table E.2. This model failed to predict research group status, which suggests that the VISION group respondents do not differ from the JOBS group respondents (model  $\chi^2(16) = 13.99$ ; p-value = 0.60).

## Comparison of the Research, Fielded, and Respondent Samples

Using administrative records data, this section discusses whether the impacts for the respondent sample can be generalized to the research sample and the fielded sample. Given that there is some survey response bias, it is important to check whether the impacts of VISION differ for respondents than for the research sample. There might be reasons other than nonresponse bias that might affect the ability to generalize impacts for the respondent sample to the research sample. As discussed previously, the fielded sample includes sample members who were randomly assigned during an interval of time that does not cover the full period of random assignment. By limiting the sample in this manner, a “cohort effect” may have been introduced. This could affect the impact estimates, because the survey cohort might differ from sample members who were randomly assigned in other cohorts.

**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**  
**Appendix Table E.2**  
**Selected Characteristics of Survey Respondents**  
**Salem, Oregon**

Characteristic	VISION Group	JOBS Group
Gender (%)		
Male	10.1	7.9
Female	89.9	92.1
U.S. citizenship (%)	99.3	100.0
Primary language (%)		
English	100.0	98.7
Spanish	0.0	1.3
Race/ethnicity (%)		
White, non-Hispanic	76.6	69.7
Black, non-Hispanic	2.8	2.1
American Indian/Alaska native	2.8	3.4
Hispanic	12.1	18.6
Asian/Pacific islander	0.7	1.4
Other race	1.4	0.7
Mixed race	3.5	4.1
Age group (%)		
Younger than 20	11.5	11.2
21-30	48.0	52.6
31-40	29.7	25.0
Older than 40	10.8	11.2
Average age (years)	29.4	29.4
Education (%)		
General Educational Development (GED) certificate	31.8	27.6
High school diploma	29.1	28.9
Technical certificate/associate's degree/2-year college program	7.4	9.2
4 years (or more) of college	2.0	2.0
None of the above	29.7	32.2
Housing status (%)		
Rent, public housing	4.1	2.6
Rent, subsidized housing	12.8	15.8
Rent, other (unsubsidized)	43.9	43.4
Own home or apartment	2.7	0.0
Emergency or temporary housing	20.9	25.0
Other, living with friends/relatives	15.5	13.2

(continued)

**Appendix Table E.2 (continued)**

Characteristic	Vision Group	JOBS Group
Current cash assistance status (%)		
Applicant	100.0	100.0
JOBS registration status (%)		
Mandatory	93.2	86.2 **
Exempt	6.8	13.8
Assistance group (%)		
Single-parent family	100.0	100.0
Total prior AFDC/TANF receipt (%)		
None	44.6	40.8
Less than 3 months	6.8	8.6
3 months or more and less than 2 years	32.4	30.9
2 years or more and less than 5 years	10.1	14.5
5 years or more and less than 10 years	5.4	4.6
10 years or more	0.7	0.7
Months employed in past 3 years (%)		
0 (Did not work)	8.1	8.6
6 or less	14.2	11.8
7 to 12	16.9	13.2
13 to 24	12.8	17.8
More than 24	48.0	48.7
Currently employed (%)		
Yes	11.5	11.2
No	88.5	88.8
Hours worked per week (among those currently employed) (%)		
Less than 10 hours	16.2	13.7
11-20 hours	64.0	59.0
21-40 hours	19.9	27.3
Number of children (%)		
0	7.4	6.6
1	44.6	38.2
2	28.4	35.5
3 or more	19.6	19.7

(continued)

**Appendix Table E.2 (continued)**

Characteristic	Vision Group	JOBS Group
Age of youngest child (%)		
2 or younger	38.0	38.0
3 to 5	29.9	21.8
5 or older	32.1	40.1
Month of random assignment (%)		
May 2003	8.8	11.8
June 2003	12.2	13.8
July 2003	18.2	17.8
August 2003	14.2	12.5
September 2003	18.2	15.1
October 2003	12.8	12.5
Sample size (total = 300)	152	148

SOURCE: Baseline information form.

NOTES: A Chi-square test for categorical variables and a t-test for continuous variables were run to determine whether there is a difference in the distribution of the characteristics across research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent. The "Sig." column indicates the probability that one would be making an error in concluding that there is a difference between research groups for the variable in question.

Appendix Table E.3 shows the adjusted means and impacts on several employment and public assistance outcomes for the research sample, the fielded sample, and the respondent sample.<sup>3</sup> This comparison is useful in assessing whether the story changes when using the different samples. The table shows that the impacts for the fielded and respondent samples are, in general, consistent with the impacts for the research sample. Though there are some quantitative differences in estimates, the findings are qualitatively the same: VISION did not increase employment or earnings for any of the cohorts, but the program did tend to increase measures of public assistance.

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<sup>3</sup>All the impacts are regression-adjusted within each sample, to control for differences in background characteristics, prior earnings, prior employment, prior public assistance receipt, and period of sample intake.



**The Employment Retention and Advancement Project**

**Appendix Table E.3**

**Comparison of Impacts for the Research, Fielded, and Respondent Samples**

**Salem, Oregon**

Outcome	VISION Group	JOBS Group	Difference (Impact)	P-Value
<b><u>Quarters 2 to 5</u></b>				
Ever employed <sup>a</sup> (%)				
Research sample	62.6	62.8	-0.3	0.903
Fielded sample	62.1	63.3	-1.2	0.797
Respondent sample	65.6	64.4	1.2	0.822
Average quarterly employment (%)				
Research sample	39.8	42.3	-2.5	0.188
Fielded sample	37.4	40.6	-3.2	0.387
Respondent sample	41.7	45.0	-3.4	0.468
Employed 4 consecutive quarters (%)				
Research sample	19.2	21.9	-2.8	0.176
Fielded sample	16.7	19.7	-3.0	0.432
Respondent sample	20.1	25.3	-5.3	0.289
Number of quarters employed				
Research sample	1.6	1.7	-0.1	0.188
Fielded sample	1.5	1.6	-0.1	0.387
Respondent sample	1.7	1.8	-0.1	0.468
Earnings (\$)				
Research sample	3,831	4,101	-271	0.346
Fielded sample	3,382	3,500	-117	0.825
Respondent sample	3,858	3,971	-113	0.867
Ever received TANF (%)				
Research sample	64.1	58.5	5.6 *	0.074
Fielded sample	63.6	60.5	3.2	0.543
Respondent sample	68.6	60.7	8.0	0.191
Amount of food stamps received (\$)				
Research sample	2,739	2,579	160 **	0.044
Fielded sample	2,768	2,519	249 *	0.060
Respondent sample	2,881	2,637	244	0.120
Total measured income (\$)				
Research sample	8,546	8,138	409	0.243
Fielded sample	8,605	7,953	652	0.297
Respondent sample	9,498	8,515	984	0.193

(continued)

### **Appendix Table E.3 (continued)**

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from administrative records from the State of Oregon.

NOTES: The research sample includes 1,504 sample members; VISION group: 742; JOBS group: 762.

The fielded sample includes 418 sample members; VISION group: 208; JOBS group: 210.

The respondent sample includes 300 sample members; VISION group: 152; JOBS group: 148.

**Appendix F**

**Examples of Employment-Related Measures  
Analyzed in This Report**



For this report on the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) program in Salem, Oregon, employment-related measures are created from unemployment insurance (UI) wage records and the ERA 12-Month Survey. This section describes some of the key employment-related measures in greater detail. The measures are grouped by the research questions that they help to answer. Measures from both UI wage records and the 12-month survey are discussed.<sup>1</sup>

## Did ERA Improve Job Placement in UI-Covered Jobs?

- **Ever employed in a UI-covered job in Years 1-2.** Very few sample members in Salem were working at the time of random assignment. The program was expected to increase job placement.
- **Ever employed as of the ERA 12-Month Survey interview.** This is a more comprehensive measure of job placement, based on responses to the ERA 12-Month Survey. In a sample that is overrepresented in the informal labor market, the survey measure is likely a better measure of overall employment. One shortcoming of this measure is that it is based on recall of past events rather than on administrative records. Moreover, it is based on the smaller survey sample.<sup>2</sup>

## Did ERA Improve Employment Retention?

As discussed in the Introduction to this report, while a lot is known about how to place welfare recipients in jobs, very little is known about how to help them retain these jobs. Facing a variety of barriers to work — including health issues, unreliable or costly child care and transportation arrangements, and difficult working conditions — welfare recipients often have unstable employment experiences. One of the key goals of ERA in Salem was to stabilize employment.

- **Average quarterly employment in UI-covered jobs.** This measure can be defined as the employment rate in the average quarter. Although the measure

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<sup>1</sup>As discussed in the report, UI wage data are a reliable source for estimating employment and earning impacts because UI wage records are stored in computerized systems shortly after the completion of a quarter and most employers are required to submit them. UI records do, however, miss wages not reported to the UI system in Oregon. These include “off-the-books,” federal, out-of-state, and military jobs as well as self-employment. Also, UI records usually do not measure job characteristics. For these reasons, data from the ERA 12-Month Survey are also used.

<sup>2</sup>The advantages and disadvantages of survey measures versus UI measures are the same for all the measures discussed in this appendix and thus are not repeated throughout.

is related to employment retention, it might also reflect job placement and the timing of initial employment. The average quarterly employment measure was computed by adding up the number of quarters employed and dividing by the total number of quarters potentially employed. For example, for the one-year measure, a sample member who was employed in two quarters received a value of 50 percent  $[(2/4) \times 100]$ .

- **Employed four consecutive quarters in UI-covered jobs.** An impact on this measure would likely signal an effect on employment retention. Because UI wage records are reported quarterly, it is not possible to know whether sample members who worked in four consecutive quarters were really employed the whole time in each quarter.
- **Number of months employed since random assignment.** This measure, from the 12-month survey, is a measure of employment stability. While it is similar to the two measures above, it provides a more finely grained measure of employment stability, since survey data can be measured in monthly intervals. Similarly, the survey measure “employed six consecutive months” is a measure of employment stability that is comparable to the “employed four consecutive quarters” measure but provides a better estimate of stability because it is measured based on months rather than quarters.

## Did ERA Lead to Advancement in the Labor Market?

The goals of ERA go beyond employment retention. Retention at a low-wage or low-quality job may represent some improvement, but the goals of ERA include advancement to jobs with better pay and benefits. Improvements in job quality can be viewed as a type of advancement. Some of these measures are mostly noneconomic (such as whether one works the night shift) but are still very important. Others (such as health benefits) can have large economic consequences that would not be incorporated in measures of earnings.

- **Earned over \$10,000.**<sup>3</sup> This measure could be related to both retention and advancement, although, like some of the other measures, it could also reflect the timing of initial employment.
- **Earnings distribution in a quarter (earned \$2,500 or more; earned between \$500 and \$2,499; earned between \$1 and \$499).** This measure

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<sup>3</sup>The amount of \$10,000 or more per year is used because an individual making the federal minimum wage (which was \$5.15 during most program operations) and working 40 hours per week would make approximately this amount.

shows whether increases in UI-covered employment are driven by increases in employment at certain levels of earnings. It is likely related to advancement and job quality, although it is subject to the limitations of UI earnings data described above.

- **Employed at a good job.** A “good job” is a job in which a respondent works 35 or more hours per week and that either (1) pays \$7.00 or more per hour and offers health insurance or (2) pays \$8.50 or more per hour.<sup>4</sup> By coupling wages and benefits, this measure allows for a more nuanced assessment of job quality.
- **Job schedule measures.** For workers in general, and for working mothers with young children in particular, job schedule can be a critical issue. It can be difficult to arrange for child care during the evening, for example. Overnight shifts can be especially difficult. However, such atypical schedules may command higher wage rates. For these reasons, it is important to analyze job schedules.
- **Job skills index.** These survey measures were adopted from the Woman’s Employment Study.<sup>5</sup> Working at jobs that require skills for which there is a high demand in the labor market is an important pathway to advancement. Even if these skills are not compensated for immediately, they may lead to longer-term improvement in labor market outcomes.
- **Employer-provided benefits.** The availability of benefits is obviously important. A lower-wage job with certain key benefits, such as health and dental insurance, may be more economically beneficial than a higher-wage job without benefits. However, many sample members were eligible for Medicaid, which may have provided more affordable benefits than employer-based health insurance programs. An important issue to note is that the measures presented in this report reflect self-reported assessments of the *availability* of benefits. Sample members may have elected not to participate in benefit plans, particularly if the plans were too expensive.

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<sup>4</sup>This definition of a good job is adapted from Johnson and Corcoran (2003).

<sup>5</sup>Web site: <http://www.fordschool.umich.edu/research/poverty/wes/index.html>.

## **What Was the Overall Effect of ERA on Employment Retention and Advancement?**

As discussed in this report's Introduction, ERA in Salem had many goals. The employment goals included employment retention and advancement.

- **Earnings in UI-covered jobs.** An impact on average total earnings could reflect improvements in job placement, retention, advancement, or some combination of the three. For this reason, impacts on total earnings are a comprehensive indicator of the effectiveness of ERA.
- **Hourly and weekly wages.** Measures of earnings are also created from the ERA 12-Month Survey. The survey measures of earnings are more refined than the UI data because earnings in the survey can be expressed as hourly wages or as weekly earnings. Thus, the survey measures provide an indication of whether any differences in earnings are “driven” by the number of hours worked or by the wage rates.



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- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.